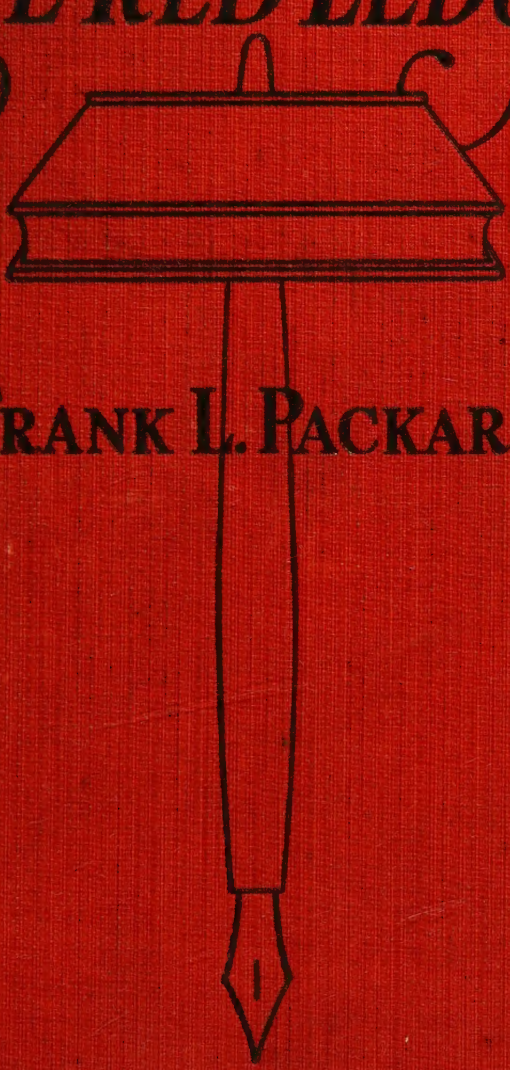
The Red Ledger



Frank L. Packard

ERIC JACKAMAN
131 DYNEVOR RD
TORONTO 10.

THE RED LEDGER

FRANK L. PACKARD

By FRANK L. PACKARD

THE RED LEDGER
BROKEN WATERS
RUNNING SPECIAL
THE LOCKED BOOK
THE FOUR STRAGGLERS
JIMMIE DALE AND THE PHANTOM CLUE
DOORS OF THE NIGHT
PAWNED
THE WHITE MOLL
FROM NOW ON
THE NIGHT OPERATOR
THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE
THE WIRE DEVILS
THE SIN THAT WAS HIS
THE BELOVED TRAITOR
GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN
THE MIRACLE MAN

THE RED LEDGER

BY

FRANK L. PACKARD

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TORONTO

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THE RED LEDGER

—Q—

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO

HAROLD ROLPH, C.E.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	C, 305	11
II	2½ Dominic Court	18
III	A Month Later	33
IV	The Accomplice	41
V	Against Time	51
VI	For Value Received	56
VII	A Matter of Identity	72
VIII	The Countermove	80
IX	Stranway Receives a Package	86
X	The Debt	92
XI	The Last Day of Grace	102
XII	In Which a Trap is Baited	120
XIII	The Man in the Checked Suit	128
XIV	The Voice on the Wire	137
XV	The Accusation	146
XVI	Stacked Cards	154
XVII	As per Account Rendered	165
XVIII	The Art of Piquet	175
XIX	The Road Through the Woods	183
XX	The Bargain	193
XXI	The Accrued Interest	200
XXII	On the Debit Side	206
XXIII	The Warning	219
XXIV	On Narrow Margin	227
XXV	The Message	240
XXVI	The Old Manuscript	246
XXVII	All but One	263
XXVIII	The Lone House	276
XXIX	On the Top Floor	286
XXX	The Fight	294
XXXI	At Midnight	305

THE RED LEDGER

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CHAPTER I

C,305

EWEN STRANWAY slid his knife blade into the paper, and cut from the "personals" of the evening edition of the *Times-Press* the few lines at which he had been staring with startled eyes. And then, as though to focus the words and convince himself that it was not some astounding hallucination, he held the clipping nearer to him to read it again:

> "If Ewen Stranway, son of the late John J. and Mary Stranway, of Kenora, Midland County, Pennsylvania, will communicate by mail with C,305, care of this paper, enclosing his photograph, he will hear from one who is in his debt."

What did it mean? A stranger in the city, and arrived but a few hours before, there was not a soul in New York he knew—none who knew him! What did it mean? What was it? A game? A plant? Debt! There was certainly no one in his debt, worse luck! It was quite the other way around! A photograph! Why a photograph? What did it mean?

Stranway frowned as he got up from his chair, and walking to the window stood looking out on that

section of Sixteenth Street, just west of Eighth Avenue, where he had taken a room that afternoon on his arrival. Only one thing was certain. The author of the "personal" was not jumping in the dark. Whoever had written it had, to a certain extent at least, an intimate knowledge of his, Stranway's, recent family affairs. Events in the last two weeks had surged upon him with blinding force: the telegram that had summoned him home from college; his parents' death in a motor accident; his father's estate found to be deeply involved, and, in consequence, himself, at twenty-four, reduced from affluence to sudden penury —and now, as a climax, this mysterious advertisement greeting him before he had literally had time to unpack his trunk and settle himself in the new surroundings that he had chosen as promising most in opportunity for the future.

What did it mean? There was something that seemed almost uncanny about it. One person, and one only knew that he was in New York—Redell, the old family lawyer. But he had left Redell in Kenora only that morning. Redell was out of the question. Who, then?

Stranway turned abruptly from the window and began to pace up and down the room, his brows furrowed, his strong, firm jaws a little out-flung, his broad, athletic shoulders squared back with a hint of aggressiveness. Suddenly, a new thought struck him. He swung quickly to the door, opened it, went down the stairs and passed out into the street. He walked rapidly to the avenue, purchased a copy of every evening paper on the news-stand and returned to his room.

He spent ten minutes over these, and then, in spite of himself, laughed a little nervously. *Each and every*

one of them contained the same advertisement word for word. Certainly, whoever had written it was leaving nothing to chance; certainly, whoever had written it was in grim earnest.

The laugh died away and his lips tightened. He crossed the room and lifted the lid of his trunk.

"I don't know what it means," he muttered; "but I'll find out, or know the reason why!"

After a little search he found a photograph of himself; then, scribbling a short note, he made a mailing package of the two, and addressed it, according to directions, to C,305, *Times-Press.* This done, he went out and posted it—and pending developments, tried to shake the matter from his mind.

But it would not "shake." It clung like an obsession, obtruding itself again and again at odd moments throughout that evening—and in the morning every paper again faithfully reproduced the "personal!"

C,305! Who was C,305? What, in Heaven's name, was at the bottom of it?

At one o'clock, when Stranway returned to his boarding house for lunch—after a morning spent in an unsuccessful attempt to find anything in the way of a position that offered him more than a mere opening for the moment, for Stranway, with characteristic determination, had made up his mind to hold out, unless his resources became exhausted first and compelled him to do otherwise, for something that would afford both an opportunity for advancement and ultimate success—his first question was for a letter or message. There was nothing; and he smiled a little mirthlessly at himself for the hold he had allowed the thing, unexplainable though it was, to obtain on him. It was too soon, of course, to expect any reply!

After lunch he went out again. He made his way across town, reached Sixth Avenue, walked down two blocks, turned east into Fourteenth Street—and the next instant he had halted as though rooted to the ground, and was staring about him in all directions. The crowd was thick on every side: women, men, children, flower girls, lace venders, a line of peddlers banking the curb. People pushed by him; some with ungracious haste, others flinging a curious look his way. Stranway, stock-still, continued to gaze, confounded, and it was a long minute before he realized the futility of it. Some one, with quick, deft fingers, had thrust an envelope into his hand—and was gone. The man in overalls, the messenger boy with jaunty cap, that well-gowned woman there—the act had been so sudden and adroit that, so far as Stranway could tell, it might have been done by any one of these, or any one of a score of others.

He glanced now at the envelope. It was plain, sealed, unaddressed. He made his way out of the press into the entrance of a building, and opened it. The sheet within contained but a single line, written in an angular, crabbed, masculine hand:

"Come at once to 2½ Dominic Court. C,305."

But now, apart from the amazing manner in which he had received it, the message caused Stranway no further surprise, as, from the moment he had felt the envelope thrust into his hand, he had sensed intuitively that it was a communication from the author of the "personal" in the papers. Nor did he now waste time in speculating over the peculiar and curious method of its delivery, for that was at least in keeping with what had gone before, and he had indulged

in enough speculation already, too much of it, indeed, for his own peace of mind. Besides, the solution was obviously imminent now; and action, once there was something concrete to base it on, was Stranway's way of doing things.

He looked again at the paper to make sure of the address, folded the sheet, slipped it into his pocket and walked back to the corner of Sixth Avenue. Here, he accosted an officer.

"Can you tell me where Dominic Court is?" he inquired.

The patrolman pointed down the avenue.

"Four blocks down, right-hand side," he answered tersely.

"Thank you," said Stranway, and crossing over the avenue, walked briskly in the direction indicated.

He walked four blocks, six—and reached the Jefferson Market. Either the officer had misdirected him, or he had passed Dominic Court without recognizing it. He wheeled and retraced his steps slowly. Halfway back up the second block he paused before a lane, or passageway, that apparently led to the rear premises of the not over-inviting buildings that bordered it on both sides, and turned to a passer-by.

"Can you tell me if Dominic Court is anywhere about here?" he asked.

"Dominic Court?" repeated the other. "I don't know. I never heard of it."

"That's queer," said Stranway—but he was to learn in the days to come that Dominic Court, though well worth the knowing, was unknown to many others as well, very many others amongst whom were those who prided themselves on their intimate knowledge of New York's nooks and crannies, many others of

those even who passed it daily in thousands goi
to and from their work.

With a courteous word of thanks to the ma
Stranway, puzzled, stepped into a dingy little secon
hand store in front of him, and for the third tim
since receiving the message repeated his question.

The proprietor, who had hastened unctuously fro
the rear upon Stranway's entrance, grunted in dissati
faction on learning his visitor's business, and grud
ingly directed him to the lane.

"H'm!" Stranway muttered facetiously to himsel
as he stepped out on the street and turned into th
passageway. "So this is it, eh? Well, I can't sa
it looks very promising for a debtor's abode! I—
hello!" His lips pursed into a low whistle of asto
ishment, and he halted abruptly.

He had come to the end of the passageway, a bar
twenty-five yards from the street—and the transitio
was utter and complete. It was as though he had bee
suddenly transported from the whirl and bustle o
modern metropolitan life with its high-strung, nervou
tension, its endless, jarring roar of traffic, to som
quiet, sequestered section of a quaint old foreign tow
True, at his right, making the north side of the cou
and continuing the line of the lane, the ugly re
brick walls, windowless, of a building rose high in ai
but apart—

"By Jove!" Stranway exclaimed in amazement.

A board walk at his left circled up to a row o
small, old-fashioned wooden houses set back on th
west side of the court. They were built in ol
Dutch style, were indeed relics, probably, of the ol
Dutch settlers themselves, two stories high, with slan
ing roofs, half curved, pierced with a series of d
minutive dormer windows like a row of little turret

Over all, ivy climbed in profusion, cool and green and refreshing. The court itself was grass-covered, neatly kept, and a driveway leading from the lane made a circuit around it. Fences, ivy-clothed like the dwellings, enclosed the court on the other two sides, shutting out the rear of the abutting buildings.

Stranway started forward along the walk.

The first house was numbered 1; the next, 1½. There were four in the row. No. 2½, therefore, would be the one at the far end.

And now, for the first time, as he passed close by the several front doors, an air of desertion about the place struck him unpleasantly. The court, in the early afternoon sun, was in shadow, but every blind in every window was closed, and not a soul was to be seen anywhere.

A sudden feeling of misgiving came over him. Before, where the quiet and peace of the place had appealed to him, it now seemed strangely unnatural and foreboding. For an instant Stranway hesitated, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he mounted the three steps to the stoop of No. 2½, which he had now reached, and lifting the heavy brass knocker, banged loudly several times upon the door.

CHAPTER II

2½ DOMINIC COURT

STRANWAY'S knock was answered almost on the moment. The door swung back seemingly of its own volition, and a dim, narrow hallway was revealed. Stranway stepped inside—and the door closed behind him. Startled, he smiled the next instant. It was simple enough, the door was operated by a cord attachment, that was all.

"This way! This way!" a man's voice called to him from an open door just down the hall.

Stranway moved forward, turned into the room—and came to an abrupt stop barely across the threshold.

Before him, in the center of the room, stood a clean-shaven little old man in a red velvet smoking jacket, his feet incased in red leather slippers, his scanty fringe of hair surmounted by a red skull-cap with bobbing tassel.

"What," demanded this personage sharply, as he fixed Stranway with bright, steel-blue eyes, "what is your favorite color—h'm?"

Stranway drew suddenly back. So this was it! This was what was behind it all—a madman!

"No," said the little old man quickly. "No; you are quite wrong. I am not at all mad. It is a question I always ask. I see you have not studied the significance of color. I recommend it to you as both instructive and of great value. There is no surer

guide to the temperament than color. For instance, blue is a cold color, whereas orange is warm."

"Oh!" said Stranway; and then, with a whimsical smile at the red slippers, the red jacket, and the red skull-cap: "And red—what is red?"

"Red?" replied the little old man instantly. *"Red is neither warm nor cold."*

Stranway, again taken aback, stared for an instant, nonplussed, at the other; then, mechanically, his eyes swept around the room. It was as curious as its occupant—and here, too, red was everywhere predominant. The heavy silken portière, that hid what was, presumably, another door opposite to the one by which he had entered; the carpet, a rich fabric of the Orient; the curtains which were drawn back from the single window that evidently gave upon the rear, since the shutters there were swung wide open to admit the light; the bookshelves, that filled in the spaces beneath and around the window as also the entire length and breadth of one side of the room; the huge safe in one corner; the upholstery of the chairs—all were red. It was very strange! A disordered pile of books on the floor, and the sliding ladder before the shelves suggested the student; a ponderous, large and very modern filing cabinet, together with the two telephones upon the desk suggested the busy man of affairs; the desk itself suggested the dilettante—it was of very old mahogany, with slender curving legs, and wondrously inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The little old man came abruptly nearer and gazed into Stranway's face.

"Yes, yes," he said; "the photograph had the Stranway features; your father's mouth, your mother's nose. You are the original of the photograph. I am perfectly satisfied. You are Ewen Stranway. Sit

down, sit down in that chair." He pointed to one facing the desk chair, which latter he took himself.

"And you," suggested Stranway bluntly, as he seated himself, "would you mind introducing yourself? I suppose you are C,305. But that, you will admit, is a trifle vague and unsatisfactory."

"Yes, I am C,305." The little old man chuckled dryly. "My name, however, is Charlebois, Henri Raoul Charlebois, descendant"—he drew himself up with a quaint air of pride—"of the Norman Counts of Charlebois."

"You speak like an American," commented Stranway.

"I should"—the blue eyes twinkled—"for I am an American, as was also my father before me."

Stranway now settled easily back in his chair. In spite of the bizarre nature of his surroundings, the bizarre appearance of this Henri Raoul Charlebois himself, there was something about the old fellow that appealed to him and attracted him strongly.

"Ah! You feel, too, that we shall get along together!" The assertion came swiftly, instantly pertinent to Stranway's thoughts.

Keen and alert of brain himself, Stranway shot a curious, appreciative glance at the other; but when he spoke it was with quiet irrelevancy:

"You seem to know a good deal about me, a good deal that I don't understand. That advertisement, the note—how did you know I was in New York, how was I recognized on the street, and what is this debt you speak of? What does it mean?"

A hard, almost flint-like expression had crept into Charlebois' face.

"It means," he replied, a sudden harshness in his voice, "that for once I have failed—and I do not often fail. I did not know that your father was in diffi-

culties. I believed him to be rich and prosperous."

Stranway stared in wonder.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand what you mean, nor how, no matter how close you might have been to my father, though I never heard him speak of you, you could have believed anything else. Everybody thought he was wealthy. Even I, his son, never dreamed that——"

"Nevertheless," broke in Charlebois, "I should have known. It was my business to know."

"But," protested Stranway in amazement, "how——"

"Wait!" Again Charlebois interrupted him. "Wait! There is no mystery about it. Listen! The true state of affairs only reached me by wire on the morning you left Kenora—yesterday morning. Your destination was New York; your address was unknown—hence the notice in the papers on your arrival. If I had failed with the father, there still remained the heir. The note you received is simply explained. My messenger knew you by your photograph. He was waiting outside your boarding house when you left there after lunch. Not wishing to become known either to you personally or to those you might question at the house, for reasons that you will come in due time to understand if you accept the proposition I am going to make to you, the messenger followed you until, in the midst of a crowd, he was able to deliver the note to you without disclosing his own identity. Is that quite clear to you?"

"Yes," said Stranway slowly. "Yes; that is clear —but *why?* My father, his circumstances, the debt— were you his friend?"

The tassel on Charlebois' skull-cap bobbed around in semi-circles, as he shook his head soberly.

"He was *my* friend—once. My friend—when I needed a friend. You are quite right, he never spoke of me. How should he? He did not know me."

Stranway, frankly bewildered, flung out his arm in an impotent gesture, but the words on his lips were checked by Charlebois' upraised hand.

"You are puzzled," said Charlebois, with an indulgent smile. "It is natural, quite natural. But have patience. You shall see. Tell me first of yourself, your position. You are no longer independent? Your funds are not abundant?"

Stranway smiled grimly.

"I have a hundred or so, that's all, to tide me over till I find something to do."

Charlebois nodded his head acquiescently.

"Just so, just so," he agreed. "Perhaps then, after all, it is as well the debt was not cancelled before. It will stand you in good stead now. I will show you the account, and I trust you will consider the offer I shall make you equitable, and a full and just quittance of the debt. In any case we will not haggle —you shall be satisfied."

Stranway swung impulsively to his feet.

"That's very honorable, very generous of you, Mr. Charlebois," he began. "I do not quite know what to say. I—I——" He fumbled for his words and stopped.

Charlebois regarded him with a kindly smile.

"It is neither one nor the other," he said. "It is simple justice. But see—here is the account."

He turned as he spoke, walked to the safe, dropped on his knees before it and began to spin the dial backward and forward. An instant later, the steel door swung open, and Charlebois returned to the desk carrying in his arms a massive book, covered in red

morocco leather, the edges bound with heavy brass and locked together by three strong hasps. He set the volume on the desk, returned again to the safe and from a drawer in an inner compartment took out a key. With this he unlocked the book, opened it and motioned Stranway to approach.

Stranway, full of nervous excitement now, moved quickly to Charlebois' side, and bending over the old man's shoulder watched the other's movements intently.

The volume was indexed. Charlebois turned to the letter "S" and ran a long, lean forefinger down the column of names.

"Stranway—Stranway," he muttered. "Stran—ah—page two hundred and forty-three!" He turned the pages deftly, stepped suddenly back, and the book lay wide open on the desk.

Stranway, bending quickly forward, read the words on the page at a glance. He read them again—and now, as they seemed to leap back at him in mockery, his look of incredulous dismay became an angry flush. He had been right at first, the man was mad—or was making a fool of him. The great red book was a ledger, and on the page open before him were scarcely a half dozen words. His father's name was at the top; beneath, was a date, and, opposite the date, was a credit entry consisting of the two words: *"One Dime."* The debit side of the ledger was a blank.

Without a word, just a short, savage laugh, Stranway wheeled abruptly for the door—and, as abruptly, spun around again. With a grip, surprising in its strength for one of his age, Charlebois had caught him by the arm and faced him about.

"My boy," he demanded gravely, "have I offered *you* ten cents? You are too impulsive, too emotional.

Have you still to learn that value is not calculated by rule of mathematics? Listen! This book is the record of a period of my life when I was homeless, destitute, and physically unable to earn my bread because my lungs were seriously affected and I was too ill and weak either to secure or do enough work to support me. It is a large book, is it not? Well, it would need be, for many debts, very many debts, were incurred in that period. I was careful then not to forget them, for I knew the day was to come when I should repay. You are beginning to understand—to understand what *ten cents* that your father gave me once might mean? That day, the beginning of repayment, came years ago now, when wealth with a sudden flood poured upon me—but of that at some other time! You are interested now in yourself and why I sent for you. There are many names in this book, many accounts still unbalanced. In that filing case yonder are almost daily records of the lives of those men and women whose names are written here. It has grown to be a stupendous work. It has called into being a far-reaching and highly trained organization. And now the time is here when I need some one very close to me, a confidant, one upon whom I can implicitly rely. This is what I hope to offer you—first, for your father's sake; second, because I believe I shall find in you the one I have been seeking. Should I prove to be right in my opinion of you, and should you then accept the offer, it is but fair I should tell you that I shall demand much—but also I will give much. I would demand absolute, unquestioning obedience; invulnerable loyalty; your sworn oath of secrecy under any circumstances that might arise."

A whim? A vagary? No; it was more than that. There was no feebleness of brain behind the steady

eyes that played on Stranway and seemed to read him through to his soul. Resolve, purpose, inflexible will, and a grim something he could not quite define were written on the other's face.

"And also," added Charlebois quietly, "it would be equally unfair before we go farther to disguise from you the fact that, should you associate yourself with me, you face the possibility of grave danger, of perhaps even death."

Death! Danger! The words struck Stranway with a cold shock, just as it seemed he was beginning to understand a little something of this quaint character before him.

"Death? Danger?" he echoed in a bewildered way.

The hard, flint-like expression was back in Charlebois' features.

"Even so—death and danger," he repeated. "You have only seen one entry in the ledger, and that was on the credit side. *There are debit entries there as well.* Debit entries, as surely debts as the others; as surely to be settled, to be balanced as the others—and with the same impartial justice. Should I forget the one and not the other? I have forgotten neither. They are all there—all!" His clenched hand fell suddenly upon the Red Ledger. "And all are paid—at maturity. Powerful men to-day are amongst those names on the debit side, men who strike in the black of night, who fight with unbuttoned foils, who turn like rats at bay to save themselves; and from these, their craft and resources, comes the danger I have warned——"

Charlebois stopped abruptly. One of the two telephones on the desk—one of a style and manufacture generally used for connecting up different parts of an

establishment—rang sharply. Stranway had not noticed the difference in the instruments before, and now he did so with a curious sense of surprise. The house was very small for such an installation; there were, he judged, perhaps four rooms in all, there could hardly be more.

His eyes, from the instrument, lifted to Charlebois' face—and he stepped back involuntarily. It seemed as though it were another man who now stood before him. Old before, Charlebois' face appeared aged almost beyond recognition; the hand that held the receiver to his ear was trembling violently; the other hand, still on top of the Red Ledger, opened and shut, opened and shut spasmodically; the man's stature seemed absolutely to shrink, and his whole frame shook as with the ague. Spellbound, dumb with amazement, Stranway stared. The receiver clattered from a nerveless hand to the desk. Charlebois tottered, recovered himself, and with a wild, hunted look around the room, turned to Stranway.

"Wait! Wait!" The words came stammering through twitching lips, and the next instant Charlebois had darted behind the red silken portière and was gone from the room.

For perhaps a minute, Stranway stood there motionless, confused, his mind in turmoil—and then, suddenly, like a galvanic shock, clearing his brain, stirring him to action, a wild scream rang through the room.

It came again—from behind the portière—full of terror, agony, despair—a *woman's* scream. A bare second, every muscle rigid, Stranway stood poised; then with a spring he reached the portière and tore it aside. A door was before him, its upper portion glass-panelled.

"My God!" he cried fearfully, and wrenched at

the door with all his strength. It would not yield. Sweat beads of horror sprang out upon his forehead.

Before him, in the room beyond, two forms were struggling—that of Charlebois and a woman; a woman, young, slender, lithe, with a face that even in its pallor now was beautiful; a woman, gowned in black, without touch of color about her save, grim in irony, a delicate purple orchid that, half wrenched from her corsage, dangled now from its broken stem. Charlebois' hand, clutching a revolver, tore suddenly free as they swayed. Like a madman Stranway flung himself at the door again. And again it resisted his attack. There was a flash, a puff of smoke, a sharp report. He heard a gurgling cry from the woman's lips. She reeled, crumpled up, pitched forward, lay a motionless, inert heap upon the floor—and a dark crimson stain gushed out upon the carpet.

Instantly, then, Stranway turned, and raced back across the room to the other door. He had not closed it after him when he had entered—*but now it was locked!* He wasted a minute in a blind, futile effort to force it; then, his brain working rationally again, he jumped for the desk, snatched up the city telephone and whipped off the receiver.

"Hello! Hello! Central!" he called frantically. "Cent——"

"Put that down!" The words came in a monotone, deadly cold, as Charlebois, with working face, his revolver covering Stranway, stepped into the room, and whipped the portière violently across the glass-panelled door behind him.

Stranway's hand dropped.

Charlebois came nearer, close to the desk, and a paroxysm of fury seemed to seize him.

"You have seen! You have seen!" His voice, high-

pitched, was almost a scream. "You would give me to the law, you would send me to the chair! Your oath, your solemn oath that no word of this will ever pass your lips, or you shall not leave this room alive!"

Stranway's face, already colorless, grayed; but, now, his lips straightened doggedly in a firm line and he looked Charlebois steadily in the eyes—it was answer enough.

"You won't?" snarled Charlebois. "You won't? I will give you until I count three. It is my life or yours. My life or yours, you fool, do you not see that? *One!"*

Stranway's mouth was dry. The room was swimming around him.

"No!" he said hoarsely.

"Two!"

There was only one chance—to launch himself suddenly at the other and risk the shot. Stranway's muscles tautened—but he did not spring.

With a broken cry, Charlebois suddenly thrust the revolver into his jacket pocket, and, lurching forward into the desk chair, buried his face in his hands.

"I can't—I can't! No, no; no more blood!" He was half moaning, half mumbling to himself. "No, no; no more blood! There has been enough—I have taken life—she is dead—come what may, no more blood." He looked up suddenly into Stranway's face. "See! See!" he cried, and, jumping to his feet, ran with quick, short steps to the safe.

Staggered for a moment at this sudden change of front, weak from the revulsion of feeling brought about by the reprieve from what he had felt was almost certain death, Stranway hung against the desk, following the queer, grotesque figure with his eyes. He saw the other swing wide the door of the safe;

and then, almost on the instant, it seemed, Charlebois came running back to the desk with laden arms.

"See! See!" he cried again. "Your oath, your oath that you will say nothing, and this is yours—all of it—all of it!" He tumbled great packages of banknotes on the desk, and his fingers fumbled with the string around a canvas bag. "All—all!" From the bag poured a glittering pile of gold.

All! Immunity for a grovelling wretch from the crime of *murder!* Stranway's hands clenched. A fierce resentment sent the blood whipping to his temples. Hush money! Money to buy his silence! Money to turn him, too, into a craven thing. His lips tightened into a straight line.

"Is it not enough?" Charlebois was pushing the notes and gold with nervous haste along the desk toward Stranway. "Then you shall have more. It is very easy money for you—very easy. You have only to say nothing, just that little thing is all I ask of you—to say nothing. You have never been here. You have seen nothing. Who will question you? There are thousands of dollars here—thousands. Take them! Take them, and go away! And there will be more each month, each week. I will make you rich! Take them, and——"

With a sudden leap, Stranway caught the other's wrists in a vise-like grip.

"I'll take your revolver," he said, his voice out of control and rasping strangely in his own ears. "I don't think I'd care to touch anything else of yours!" Mercilessly he jerked the old man around, and, holding Charlebois now by the collar of his jacket, snatched the revolver from the other's pocket. "Now then! You'll either open that door, which someway or other you locked, and march out to the first police-

man, or I'll telephone the police from here. You can take your choice."

"Money!" The old man choked from the tightening grip. "Listen! Don't be a fool! You are young! I will give you anything in the world you want. You shall live in luxury. Do you know how much is there on the desk? Look at it! All big bills! Big bills! There is a fortune even there—and that is only a beginning. Monday——"

With his grip still upon the other, Stranway reached for the telephone.

"You are an old man," he said between his teeth, "or I would ram your money down your throat! As it is, I'll do it anyhow if you——"

His sentence ended with a low, startled cry. His hand from Charlebois' collar dropped nervelessly away. He was staring like a man bereft of his senses at the red portière before the glass-panelled door. It had swung wide again—and standing there, brown eyes fixed upon him, half challenging, half coyly demure, was the woman with the orchid who, but a moment since, he would have sworn had been murdered before his eyes.

And then Stranway burst suddenly into a harsh, savage laugh. Perhaps *he* was mad, too! Certainly, at least, he had been made to play the part of a fool!

But it was Charlebois who spoke—in a strangely gentle way, as he adjusted the ruffled collar of his red velvet jacket.

"My boy," he said, "you are piqued. You feel that, whether I am mad or not, the prank has been carried a little too far at your expense."

Stranway did not answer. He looked at the girl. Her eyes met his again, but very steadily now; great, self-reliant, deep brown eyes—and, curiously putting

a curb upon his anger, they seemed to hold now a strange sincerity.

But now, with a little flush of color mounting to her cheeks, she turned quickly away, and the red portière dropped into place behind her. He heard the glass-panelled door close softly. She was gone.

He bit his lips. If this Henri Raoul Charlebois was mad, *she* wasn't. But what was the meaning of it all? Who was she?

Again it was Charlebois who spoke—as naturally as though Stranway had asked his question aloud.

"She is very fond of that flower you saw her wearing," said the little old gentleman quietly; "and so here we call her—the Orchid."

Stranway, with a little start, lifted his eyes from the red portière upon which they had been fixed, and looked at the other. Tempted to nurse back his waning resentment, he was minded to make no reply. And yet, was it curiosity that was the stronger—or what?

"And—the Orchid"—he stumbled over the name—"is a member of this organization of yours that you spoke of, I suppose?"

"She is more than that," replied the little old gentleman softly. And then suddenly he came forward and laid both hands on Stranway's shoulders. "My boy," he said earnestly, "it was all necessary. There has been no jest, no mockery, no intention to hurt or wound your pride. There was far too much at stake for me to base my decision in reference to you on anything but certainty and proof. Do you not remember that I said I *hoped* I should find in you the one I have been seeking? And so I risked giving you offense to prove you. You have shown that neither fear nor bribery will move you to an act that is foreign

to your conscience, as acquiescence in a demand such as I made upon you *must* be foreign to the conscience of any decent man. You have shown—what I require most of all—that implicit confidence can be placed in you. And so I ask you now to come here and join me in a very intimate way in my work; to come here and share with me the burden that in these later years, I might almost say the closing years during which that book there will be balanced forever, have grown too heavy for me alone. We will not speak of material recompense, for money will be the consideration of least importance between us. I promise you adventure, I promise you romance; and I promise you that you will never be called upon to participate in any act of which you do not conscientiously approve. But again, too, I must warn you that you will not be free from the dangers that surround me—and they are many and grave."

The little old gentleman's hands fell from Stranway's shoulders, and he stepped quietly to the door and opened it.

"I do not want you to answer now," he said. "You are mentally disquieted for the moment. Think well about it—and come to me to-morrow morning with your decision."

And Stranway, finding himself a moment later in the sunlight of the quaint courtyard, rubbed his eyes. It was as though he had been dreaming.

CHAPTER III

A MONTH LATER

IT was night in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court; but it was Ewen Stranway, not Henri Raoul Chalebois, who sat now at the antique desk under the soft glow of the red-shaded lamp. A strange, quickened sense of excitement was upon him. Before him lay a note written in Charlebois' angular, crabbed hand. So the time had come at last! This was to be his first active participation in—

He leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and stared musingly around him. A month had gone since that morning when, following his strange afternoon experience in this same room here, he had entered the service of Henri Raoul Charlebois. He had done so after a night of troubled mental debate, prompted to his final decision by he could not exactly have explained what, except that perhaps a dogged determination to see the thing through, a vividly aroused curiosity, and, perhaps too, a haunting recollection of brown eyes that had looked at him very steadily, had all played their part. And, having come to Dominic Court, he had remained—he smiled gravely—because almost from the first moment he had become lost, engrossed in his surroundings and his work, and because as the days went by he had come more and more to know and respect and admire that little old white-haired gentleman in the red velvet jacket and shoes, and the red skull-cap with its bobbing tassel, whom once he had thought mad.

His mind, harking back now over the weeks that were gone, lingered upon the picture that was conjured up. Reality and unreality seemed curiously blended. The composite picture was strange indeed! Far from being all that it seemed was this row of four old-fashioned, ivy-covered houses here that faced the neatly kept, but obscure little courtyard. True, to the outsider it was but a row of four quaint old Dutch dwellings, each with its separate stoop and porch, each with its separate door and ponderous brass knocker, each with its separate and distinct ménage. And so, too, it was to the tradesmen, the grocers and the butchers; to the postman in his daily rounds; to the patrolman who, strolling leisurely along Sixth Avenue, turned off, walked up the few yards of passageway between the buildings abutting on that thoroughfare, cast an accustomed glance around the court, perfunctorily twirled his stick, and went back to his beat again. Four to all of these; one to those within! The mail delivered at 1, 1½ or 2 Dominic Court came quickly through the inconspicuous connecting doors at the lower end of each hallway to this desk here in the Red Room where he sat tonight.

Curious, too, were the inmates! Of many walks in life, of many nationalities, they came and went, bewildering, almost kaleidoscopic in their shifting changes—changes that embraced both numbers and personnel. And here, too, should this by any chance be remarked by the profane, a most commonplace, uninteresting explanation blunted at once the edge of one's appetite for information. At 1 Dominic Court, Mrs. Morrison, a middle-aged widow, kept lodgers; at 1½ Dominic Court, a young French couple, Pierre Verot and his wife, kept lodgers; at 2 Dominic Court,

Miss Priscilla Bates, an elderly lady from whose gracious air of dignity and culture one said at once, "she must have seen better days, poor soul," kept lodgers. And 2½ Dominic Court? Ah, that was apart! There an eccentric little old gentleman, who bothered no one and was bothered by no one in return, lived alone with a housekeeper and his books.

Who would have dreamed that, behind its mask of peace and quiet, slumbering old Dominic Court, in the dead of night, at noontime, at dawn, at all hours and as a single entity, would suddenly and often awake to busy and restless activity, not with confusion or commotion, but as some high-powered, sleek and well-groomed piece of machinery, confident in its own mighty force, starts with eloquent serenity into motion!

Charlebois! Stranway's face softened. He had come to *know* Charlebois. He had come to understand the meaning of that massive, brass-bound Red Ledger which contained those strange accounts contracted in the years before when, sick and destitute, without means of sustenance, some in sympathy and love and kindness had held out a helping hand to Charlebois—and some had spurned him in his misery, callously, indifferently, plunging him into still blacker depths of despair, turning from him as from an unclean, leprous thing, remembering never the tie of human kinship, and even using his helplessness on occasions to further their own nefarious ends. He had come to understand how the stumbling upon gold in the far Northland, the foundation of that fortune which had multiplied and re-multiplied into untold wealth, had been devoted to the building up of a stupendous system whose ramifications spread out limitlessly, secretly keeping Charlebois in intimate touch

with those, widely scattered now, whose names were written on the Red Ledger's pages. And thus, lavishing thousands if need be, lavishing endless time and effort, where perhaps the original obligation had been no more than a cheery word of comfort and encouragement, Charlebois counted never the cost that at the psychological moment he might bring joy and happiness and peace into the lives of those who once, in his dire need, had brought a ray of sunlight into his own; and, too, *as red was neither warm nor cold,* the symbol of impartiality which Charlebois had adopted, with equal tenacity of purpose, with an equal outpouring of his wealth, immutably, yet without malice or vindictiveness, governed only by a broad and discerning sense of justice, where only retribution was merited an hundredfold, he settled at maturity those grimmer entries on the debit side.

Mad? Charlebois mad because of this? Stranway shook his head. Was there any one, indeed, into whose mind this very idea had not come as a fascinating subject for speculation—what it would be like if all the good and all the ill one enjoyed and suffered through life at the hands of others should be tabulated and repaid in kind? He, Stranway, had thought of it. Everybody had! But only Charlebois out of all the world had put into practice what dreamers dreamed of. Mad? He had found Charlebois a strange and complex character perhaps, eccentric perhaps; but a man full of sterling honor, of wondrous human sympathy and love, gentle, tender-hearted as a woman, fleeing in almost ridiculous dismay from a word of thanks, panic-stricken at the first expression of gratitude from those he so nobly served—and yet ever ruled by the same inflexible purpose to pay impartially each and every account no matter what it

might be, a purpose from which he neither swerved nor admitted appeal, and which was the foundation and basis whereon was built each of the human dramas that, finding birth in the pages of the Red Ledger, Charlebois played out to their fruition with master strategy on the stage of life.

A strange month! And strange too his, Stranway's, part in it! It had been the busiest month that he had ever known, crowded with a multitude of diverse employments. From Pierre Verot he had learned the use of skeleton keys, and somewhat of the art of facial make-up; he was still studying "morse" under the tutelage of Miss Priscilla Bates. The secret codes of the organization Charlebois himself had explained. The daily reports that came by mail from those at work outside were open to his inspection; the key to the Red Ledger itself was his at will; the safe, always stored with great sums of money, was his to command. The implicit confidence of which Charlebois had spoken had been given in the most literal sense. Nor had his personal comfort been overlooked. He had found, already prepared and waiting for him, a tastefully, even luxuriously furnished apartment near at hand on Sixth Avenue.

"Learn!' Charlebois had said. "And as soon as you are ready, the active work, the real work before you will begin. Learn—that you may be able to take my place itself when necessary."

Stranway stirred in his chair, and looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past eleven. Too early yet!

He glanced around the room, frowning now a little in a puzzled way. Yes, it had been a strange month! A month that he counted the best he had ever lived, and yet it had plagued him somewhat in that it had

held back something from the fullness of what had seemed its first promise. He would have liked to have seen those brown eyes again. He had counted on seeing them. The Orchid! But there had been no sign of her. She certainly did not live in Dominic Court. And Charlebois' answer to his inquiries had not been wholly satisfactory!

"Who was she? Where was she?" he had asked.

"My boy," Charlebois had said, "where confidence is mine to give I give it to you freely and without reserve, but here it is not mine. She whom you know as the Orchid you will meet, often perhaps, when you come to play a personal part in the work outside, but I can tell you no more now than I told you on that first day: that she is known here as—the Orchid."

Stranway found a wry smile twitching at his lips. It wasn't very satisfactory! "When he came to play a personal——" He sat bolt upright in his chair. That was what he was going to do to-night for the first time!

"I wonder!" said Stranway under his breath.

He was staring now at the note in Charlebois' crabbed hand that lay on the desk before him. He had left word at his apartment—the invariable rule of the organization—where he was to be found, and had dined that evening at Talimini's, a café he had discovered to his liking. Halfway through the meal a messenger had come from Charlebois instructing him to be at Dominic Court not later than eleven o'clock. He had returned here long before the hour, and found that Charlebois had left hurriedly, early in the evening, for Cleveland. Verot had handed him Charlebois' note. He picked it up now, and read it again:

"Steener—black hair, black mustache cut very close, thin man, very tall—secretary to John K. Poindexter. Your name is Kenneth Gordon. Meet Steener midnight sharp to-night Wall and William Streets. Go with Steener to P's office—he has agreed to turn over certificate for twenty-five shares West County Tool and Machine Company stock belonging to his employer. Stock with proxy attached should bear original owner's signature on each document, transfers of both in blank. You are to pay Steener fifty thousand dollars—you will find the money in the safe. Meeting of company day after to-morrow in Cleveland, ten a. m. Bring stock to me there by first train. Vital that it should reach me before meeting, control depends upon it. At any cost do not fail.

"C.

"P. S. I have not forgotten my promise. Your conscience need not trouble you."

Stranway smiled a little grimly at the postscript. His conscience might well be troublesome here, if he had not learned one thing in the month that was gone; that Henri Raoul Charlebois was entitled to receive without question what he so fully gave—implicit confidence. Fifty thousand dollars for twenty-five shares! It was the price, not of twenty-five shares, but the price apparently at which a man had sold himself. But he knew no more than he could glean from the note itself. The Red Ledger had supplied no further information, for it contained neither the name of Steener nor the name of Poindexter—he had looked when he had first read the note.

He glanced at his watch again, then pressed a button on the desk.

Flint, one of the organization's men, gray-eyed,

clean-shaven, of muscular build and of about Stranway's own age, answered the summons.

"Have a touring car ready for me at the corner of the avenue in five minutes," Stranway said. "I will drive myself."

The man disappeared.

Stranway went to the safe, took out a large unsealed envelope in which he had previously placed a hundred five-hundred dollar bills, thrust the envelope into his pocket, locked the safe, and, turning out the light in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court, left the house.

CHAPTER IV

THE ACCOMPLICE

IT was exactly one minute of twelve as Stranway drew up at the curb at the corner of Wall and William Streets, and, alighting from the car, hastily lifted the hood, and made a pretense of peering anxiously at his engine.

A man's form, black, shadowy, came around the corner. The man coughed slightly, then paused nervously and uncertainly. As far as the darkness would permit of identification, the man answered to the description Charlebois had given of Steener.

"I say!" called Stranway deliberately. "I seem to have met with a bit of an accident. Will you give me a hand for a moment?"

The man came forward—and the glare from the right-hand lamp of the car fell full upon him.

"All right!" said Stranway calmly. "You're looking for Kenneth Gordon, aren't you?"

"Yes," said the man quickly. He stepped nearer, and stared into Stranway's face. "Have you got it?" he asked hoarsely. "I'm Steener."

"Yes; I've got it," Stranway answered quietly.

"Let me see it, then," whispered Steener, with nervous eagerness. "Let me see it."

Stranway eyed the other speculatively, curiously, for an instant. Steener's face was flushed, his eyes seemed to burn feverishly, and the muscles around his lips were twitching noticeably. The man was evidently in a highly overwrought state of nervous tension.

"Do you think it is wise—here?" Stranway asked dryly.

"I don't know—and I don't care!" Steener blurted out. "My God, I'm risking everything I've got on earth for this! It's a lot of money for—for what you get, and I've got to know it's straight. I've got to know before I move a finger. And it's got to be in *cash*. That was the agreement."

"Very well," agreed Stranway coolly. He glanced up and down the street. No one was in sight. He reached quickly into his pocket, took out the envelope, turned back the flap, and allowed the ray of the headlight to play for a moment on the crisp, new yellow notes within. Then, as quickly, he slipped the envelope back again into his pocket. "Now," he said briskly, "if you're satisfied, we'll——"

"It's true," said Steener in a tense monotone, as though speaking to himself. "It's true. I—I was afraid there——"

"Let's go!" Stranway cut in sharply, a sudden anxiety sweeping over him to get this part of the night's business through and done with. The other impressed him with little confidence as a companion to depend upon in a pinch or a tight hole where nerve and coolness were the first requisites. As a matter of fact, the man appeared to be badly frightened already.

"Yes; let's go!" echoed Steener uneasily. "It's just around the corner. Let's go, and—and get the business over."

He started forward, and Stranway fell into step beside him. A moment later they had entered a large building; and while Steener fumbled with a key at the door of a suite of ground-floor offices at the left of the entrance, Stranway, with a quick glance, appraised his surroundings. A single incandescent

lighted up a short corridor dimly, and disclosed a rotunda beyond with its semi-circular rows of metal elevator doors—but that was all. Both corridor and rotunda were empty.

Steener opened the door softly; and, as Stranway, following the other, stepped over the threshold, he could just faintly decipher a part of the firm's name, "——K. Poindexter," upon the frosted-glass panels. Steener closed the door noiselessly behind them, and, with a muttered caution to keep close and not stumble over anything, led the way forward.

It was very dark. Stranway could scarcely make out the form of his guide in front of him. Numerous objects, desks presumably, discernible only by a deeper shade of black than the surroundings, were on every hand. They were evidently in the large general office of the firm.

Presently Stranway heard Steener open another door. And then he felt Steener's hand pluck at his arm in an agitated way.

"We're here." Steener's voice was unsteady. "This is Mr. Poindexter's private office. We're—we're here."

"Yes; all right!" snapped Stranway. His environment, the purpose that had brought him here, and most of all Steener's panicky state of nerves, had begun to have a creepy, uncomfortable effect upon him. "Yes; all right!" he snapped again. "Don't lose your grip! Where's the stock and the proxy?"

"In the safe—in Mr. Poindexter's private safe." Steener was chattering now. "Here, you take this!" He thrust an electric flashlight into Stranway's hand. "I—I brought it because we wouldn't dare turn on a light which might show from the outside. Here, come this way." He caught Stranway's arm again and

pulled him across the room. "Now—now switch it on."

A round white ray of light stole from between Stranway's fingers, and played upon the nickeled knob and dial of a small safe. Steener got down on his knees and began to work at the combination; but again and again, as he turned the knob, his hand, trembling violently, kept over-running the numbers. The minutes passed, two, three, four of them—abortively—and with each one the tension grew.

Stranway could hear his own heart-beats now. It was getting *him,* this black shape kneeling there, fingers knocking agitatedly against the rim of the dial. It seemed to introduce something sinister into the silence itself.

Steener brushed his hand across his forehead with a helpless gesture.

"I—I can't get it," he said thickly. "You—you try. I'll give you the combination."

Impatient, contemptuous of the other, but angry also at his own sense of uneasiness, Stranway in turn dropped to his knees before the safe as Steener edged away to make room for him. And then, still holding the flashlight himself, the fingers of Stranway's right hand closed on the knob.

"Go on!" he breathed.

"Yes, give me a chance," said Steener heavily. "Now, one turn to the left, then to forty-five."

"One left—forty-five." The dial spun under Stranway's quick, sure fingers. "Go on."

"Two to the right, then eleven." Steener was mopping at his brow with his hand.

Again the dial spun.

"Two right—eleven," repeated Stranway quickly. "Go on, man—go on!"

"One turn to the—my God, *listen!*" Steener grasped suddenly, frenziedly, at Stranway's arm. "Put out the light! Put out the light!" he choked. "Listen!"

In an instant the light was out, and Stranway was on his feet. He felt the blood ebb from his face. Tense, strained and rigid, he stood for a moment listening. Silence—heavy, throbbing, palpitating! There was nothing else.

A gasp came from Steener—like a moan of relief.

"It's nothing—thank God, it's nothing! I—I thought I heard something. I—I ain't used to this sort of thing."

"I'm not a professional safe-tapper myself!" Stranway flung out viciously. "For Heaven's sake, keep your nerve!" He dropped to his knees again, and once more the white beam of light played on the dial. "Two right—eleven," he prompted sharply. "What's next?"

"One turn to the left, then to thirty-six, and throw to the lock," directed Steener huskily.

"Yes," said Stranway tersely.

There was a slight metallic thud as the handle operated the bolts, then the heavy door swung silently back, and the flashlight in Stranway's hand bored into the interior of the safe.

Steener bent forward quickly, opened a drawer, extracted two folded papers, and stepped back.

"I've got them," he panted. "I've got them. Shut the safe again, and lock it."

Stranway closed the door, shot the bolts into place with a twist of the handle, gave a twirl to the dial, and stood up.

"The money!" muttered Steener hungrily. "Give me the money now."

"Let me see the documents," Stranway countered bluntly.

"Yes, yes; here, here—come here to the desk," said Steener eagerly.

The light in Stranway's hand followed the other's movements, and rested on a massive, flat-topped rosewood desk. Steener laid the papers upon it. Stranway's steps were noiseless, deadened by the thick rug that covered the floor, as he stepped to the desk, picked up the papers and began to examine them.

The first was a certificate for twenty-five shares of the stock of the West County Tool and Machine Company made out to one Frederick H. Longley. He turned it over quickly. The stereotyped form of transfer on the back was signed by Longley and duly witnessed—but the space for the transferee's name was left blank. The other was a proxy for the stock made out in like form. Both were in accordance with Charlebois' instructions. He folded the documents and slipped them into his pocket.

"The money! The money!" reiterated Steener wildly, holding out his hand. "The money!"

Stranway, without a word, tossed the envelope containing the banknotes upon the desk.

Steener clutched at it fiercely, pulled out the notes and began to count them, whispering eagerly to himself, his fingers shaking.

Grim-faced, Stranway held the light and watched him. A bill fluttered to the floor from the fumbling hands. Stranway stooped, picked it up, and thrust it again into Steener's fingers; then he leaned forward suddenly and caught the other's hand.

Steener jumped back nervously, as though he had been struck.

"What is it? What is it? What's the matter?" he mumbled.

"Look here," demanded Stranway sharply, "why didn't you put the papers in your pocket when you left the office this evening, instead of coming back here for them in the middle of the night?"

"Because I didn't dare," said Steener, staring at Stranway in surprise. "I thought you understood. Mr. Poindexter told me to get all that stock together and ready for him to take away with him. He went to Cleveland to-night. There were about a hundred certificates and proxies in all. I made a package of them and handed them to him. I left this one in the safe—don't you see? I was afraid he might *count* them. If he did he would find one short; and then, of course, it would seem no more than carelessness on my part that had caused me to overlook one, for it would still be in the safe, you understand? He didn't count them"—Steener seemed to shiver slightly as he spoke —"he—he trusted me."

He trusted me! The words seemed to curl like the hot, burning sting of a whiplash, flicking Stranway on the raw. It was what some inner voice of his own had been striving to say for the last few minutes, wasn't it? Conscience! What was it Charlebois had said about conscience? His lips tightened. It was a little late in the game to distrust Charlebois now, wasn't it? A little late to kick a hole in the only justification he had for what he was doing here!

"I had to accompany him to the train, leave the office when he did," Steener went on; "so, of course, there was nothing to do but come back for it. And I wasn't going to come back until—until I was sure I was going to get my money. I—I've got to get out of the country now, but these'll take me"—he was cramming

the banknotes into his pocket—"these'll take me a long way, and I'll make a new start—a long way, and——"

Each man was staring into the other's face; each, like a figure turned to stone, stood motionless, breathless, one on either side of the desk. This time there was no mistake. The light in Stranway's hand vanished.

Steener reached across the desk, and caught at Stranway convulsively.

"My God," he gasped, "I forgot to lock the door of the outer office. It's the watchman. He's found it open, and he's coming."

A heavy tread, sounding nearer and nearer, came from the room without. And now a faint glow of light, undoubtedly from the watchman's lantern, crept along the ceiling from where, near the top, the office partitions were of glass.

"We can't get out—there's no way out!" Steener was whispering in terror. "And even if we broke away from him, he'd *recognize* me, and then, and then—oh, my God!" The last was a broken sob.

Stranway's jaws clamped together. In spite of the imminent danger to himself, a wave of pity for the other swept over him. He was not questioning Charlebois now. He dared not question Charlebois for his own peace of mind. But fifty thousand dollars would tempt many men; and, whatever it all might mean, it was no more than playing the game to give this man a chance, if he could.

His fingers closed with a fierce, significant pressure on Steener's arm.

"Leave the watchman to me," he said under his breath. "Get over there by the partition near the

door. The instant he comes in—run for it! Do you understand?"

Without waiting for a reply, half guiding, half pulling Steener with him, Stranway crossed to the door, and both crouched back close against the wall.

The footsteps came nearer. The man was tramping heavily down the aisle of the general office. Came then a metallic ring as of the lantern base knocking against something. The steps halted at the threshold of the private office. A hand fumbled at the door-knob. And then the door opened, and a path of light fell across the floor.

Like a flash, Stranway's arms shot out, his hands closed on the dark form behind the light—and with a sudden pull he brought the man staggering toward him through the doorway.

There was a crash, a tinkle of splintering glass as the lantern sailed across the room, smashed against the opposite wall, and went out. Came then a chorus of growling, gasping oaths from the watchman—and the man, quick to act, grappled savagely with Stranway. The next instant, they had pitched to the floor, and, rolling over and over, each was seeking a master hold.

"Run!" Stranway flung at Steener—and heard the other dash frantically away through the outer office.

But now the sweat beads were standing out on Stranway's forehead. Muscular and athletic though he was, he was being hard put to it to hold his own, and was at a decided disadvantage in that he had no wish to strike or harm the other—only to break from the man now that Steener had got away, and, with a minute's start, trust to the darkness to effect his own escape.

For a moment now he was uppermost. It was his

chance. Concentrating all his strength in a sudden effort, he wrenched himself free from the other's arms, sprang to his feet, gained the door, crashed it shut behind him, and dashed blindly down the outer office, his hands outstretched to ward himself off as best he could from the desks and chairs about him.

Shouts and yells came from the private office. He heard the inner door open—but he had reached the outer one now. He gained the corridor, and leaped out into the street. No one was in sight. But the watchman's voice, bawling the alarm, came from within—and in another half minute the man would be in the open where his cries would attract the notice of any one within a radius of blocks.

Running like a deer, Stranway made for the corner. As he reached it, a glance over his shoulder showed him the watchman just emerging from the building—and then a stream of flame cut the blackness, and the roar of a revolver shot echoed up and down the deserted street.

Grimly, Stranway flung himself around the corner. The dark mass of his car showed just ahead. And then, startled, he paused for the fraction of a second. He had stopped his engine, but the quick throb and pound of it came to him now. Had Steener had enough sense for that? A form loomed up from the driver's seat. A voice, low, tense, vibrant, came to him.

"Quick!" it called.

CHAPTER V

AGAINST TIME

STRANWAY threw himself into the tonneau. The car leaped forward like a greyhound from the leash. There was another shot—from the corner this time. And then a skid, a whir, the off wheels lifted from the ground, and the car had swerved into the first side street. But to Stranway all this was as something extraneous, something apart, as he scrambled wildly now over into the front seat. It wasn't Steener who was driving—it wasn't even a *man*.

And then a street lamp for a flashing instant caught the beauty of the girl's face, the truant strands of hair whipping at her cheeks, the dark eyes bright with excitement fixed steadily on the road ahead; threw into relief the slim figure crouched over the steering wheel, and Stranway caught a glimpse of a delicate flower nestling in the dark setting of her dress—a purple orchid.

For a moment, breathless from his race, Stranway could not speak. He was conscious of a suddenly pounding pulse that was not due to his extreme exertions. The Orchid! From what Charlebois had said weeks ago, he had had a vague hope from the moment he had left Dominic Court that somehow, somewhere, he might see her to-night since he was at last on "active service"; but he had not dreamed it would be like this.

"You!" he cried out.

She turned and looked at him, flashing him a smile.

"I was wondering," she said, "if you remembered me."

"Remembered you!" Stranway gasped. And then he laughed because her eyes were mischievous. "Well, you haven't given me much chance to in the last month," he said; "but I guess you've made up for it to-night with compound interest."

They had swung on to Broadway, and headed uptown. There was no longer any sound of pursuit. But the car was still running at terrific speed.

"That sounds like dear old Charlebois," she said. "'Compound interest!' And speaking of Charlebois——"

"We won't!" said Stranway decisively. "We'll talk about you. This is the first chance I've had, you know."

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid there's hardly time for that," she said.

"Oh, yes; there is!" asserted Stranway. "We're quite safe now, and you're running much too fast. Stop the car, and let me drive."

But now the laughter had gone out of her face and eyes.

"Presently—not yet," she answered. Then quickly, seriously: "You were to leave for Cleveland to-morrow to be in time for a meeting on the following morning—with the stock? You were to meet Charlebois there?"

Something in her tone caused him alarm.

"Yes," he said. "Yes—what is it? What has happened?"

"I do not know," she replied hurriedly, "except that it is a matter of life and death to have that certificate and the proxy at the meeting, and——"

"Well," Stranway broke in reassuringly, "I've got them."

"I supposed you had," she said hastily. "It is not that. There has been a wretched mistake. I do not know whether one of our men has blundered badly, or how it was caused. The meeting is for *to-morrow* morning, not the day after."

"To-morrow morning!" repeated Stranway mechanically, as though not fully sensing the meaning of the words—and then with a rush it came upon him in all its grim significance. At any cost do not fail, Charlebois had said. To-morrow morning—it was *this* morning now! "You are sure—you are sure?" he cried. "Charlebois—does Charlebois know?"

"He knows—*now,*" she said. "It was from him I received the news. He is travelling on the same train with Poindexter. He wired duplicate telegrams en route to both of us. I received mine three-quarters of an hour ago. Yours is probably at the Court. I was afraid it would have arrived after you had left there, and that is why you found me here in the car."

This morning! Stranway's mind, wrestling with the problem forced suddenly upon him, was groping for a solution. He pulled out his watch, managed to make out the time, and groaned. It was fourteen minutes of one. There were nine hours left. Cleveland must be, roughly, something like four hundred and fifty miles away. Nine into four hundred and fifty was—fifty miles an hour. It was possible, just possible, if only all were ready; but the time it would take now to make the arrangements left the chance a desperate one at best. It was, however, the only chance he could see. He turned to her.

"A special——"

"Is being made up now," she supplied coolly. "It

will be ready for you by the time you reach the Grand Central. I told them you would be there by one o'clock. They have agreed to make Cleveland by a quarter to ten in the morning, and I have wired Charlebois on the train that you will meet him at the office of the Machine Company."

"You did that!" ejaculated Stranway, staring at her in amazement and unveiled admiration; and then, with a start: "But what are you slowing for now? I didn't know you were racing for a train when I said anything about speed a moment ago, and——"

His words ended in a surprised gasp. The car had come to a complete standstill at the corner of an intersecting street, and she had sprung lightly to the sidewalk.

"Flint will meet you with your bag at the station, and bring back the car," she said quickly. "You understand everything now, and I have work yet to do. Hurry! There isn't a moment to spare. You will need all the time you've got to make the station—and you mustn't fail!"

Dazedly, he squeezed into the seat behind the wheel, and leaned out toward her.

"Yes, that's all right," he protested, "but surely there's no necessity for you——"

She did not answer—she had simply disappeared around the corner.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Stranway earnestly to himself; and then conscious that her last words were the key to the situation, that he must not fail, that every minute was literally now a priceless asset, he sent the car leaping forward on its way uptown again.

Twelve minutes later, as he ran through the gates and out on the platform of the Grand Central Station, he found his train waiting for him. He snatched

his bag from Flint's hand, and sprang on the car's steps. A conductor, watch in hand, raised two fingers to the cab—and the "special" with a marked-up schedule, rights over every mortal thing on earth, that was undoubtedly already eliciting benedictions of pungent unholiness from dispatchers many miles away as they rearranged and readjusted their train sheets, began to glide out of the station.

Stranway's brain was in a whirl as he turned into his berth. The events of the night had followed each other with stunning rapidity. Question upon question surged upon him. Charlebois' promise, Charlebois' character itself, seemed strangely at variance with his *acts* to-night in so far as Steener was concerned. What did it mean? And this blunder in the dates, so nearly fatal, how had that come about? And Poindexter, the capitalist—why had Charlebois so suddenly and unexpectedly left for Cleveland on the same train with him? What was this meeting that made of these few paltry shares, twenty-five of them out of an issue of thousands doubtless, of such vital importance?

And the Orchid—he was still thinking of the Orchid when, half an hour later, he dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

FOR VALUE RECEIVED

IT was twenty minutes of ten in the morning, five minutes better than the railroad officials had promised, when the "special" rolled into Cleveland; and at ten minutes of ten, a taxi, after a wild dash through the city, deposited Stranway at the entrance to a large office building.

He stepped from the elevator on the fourth floor and walked rapidly down the corridor. Looking for the general office, he passed two doors each bearing the sign of the West County Tool and Machine Company, but with the word "private" underneath. There was evidently quite an extensive suite of offices. But before the third door, also marked "private," he halted abruptly. From within, sharp, imperative, suddenly raised in tone, he recognized Charlebois' voice.

With a perfunctory knock, he opened the door, stepped inside—and stood stock-still just beyond the threshold. Before a flat-topped desk in the center of the room stood the little old gentleman of Dominic Court, stern-faced, a revolver in his hand. Across the desk, huddled in a chair, his body crouched forward, was another man—a middle-aged man with grizzled hair, upon whose bloodless features, as he turned his head apathetically at the sound of the opening door, Stranway read utter misery and hopelessness.

"Ah, my boy!" Charlebois' expression had relaxed a little, and he spoke quietly now without emotion.

"Ah, my boy; you have done well! Close the door."

Mechanically, his eyes playing now on Charlebois, now on the other, Stranway obeyed.

Charlebois, with a critical glance at the figure seated at the desk, pocketed the revolver. Then he turned again to Stranway.

"I am hardly ten minutes ahead of you," he said. "My train was late." He held out his hand. "Let me see what you have brought."

Stranway handed Charlebois the stock certificate and proxy without comment.

The little old gentleman examined them attentively; then thrust them hurriedly into his pocket as a side door connecting with an office beyond opened suddenly, and a stout, florid-faced man, with hard gray eyes, clean-shaven lips and short side-whiskers, stepped pompously into the room. The man stopped a foot from the door and glanced aggressively, impatiently around; then his eyes fixed upon the form at the desk, and something very like a sneer curled his lips.

"H'm!" said Charlebois abruptly. "Close the door, Poindexter."

The newcomer was very evidently not in the habit of being addressed without due respect, much less of receiving curt commands. The red flushed angrily to his face.

"Who the devil are you, sir?" he snapped.

"At present," Charlebois informed him gently, "I am a stockholder of the West County Tool and Machine Company."

"Oh!" Poindexter's laugh was short and brittle. "Oh, I see!" He jerked his hand toward the desk. "One of Gordon's crowd, eh? Well, we'll be glad to hear anything you've got to say in the board-room. It's ten o'clock now."

"I was going to ask for a postponement until, say—to-morrow," said Charlebois softly.

"Were you really?" inquired Poindexter ironically. "Well, that's too bad!"

"Until *to-morrow,*" repeated Charlebois, but with sudden significance now.

"Eh—what!" Poindexter's voice was harsh, but into his eyes had crept a quick, startled expression. "What do you mean?"

"Close the door, Poindexter!" Charlebois' tones rose sharply.

A moment Poindexter hesitated, then he turned, banged the door shut and strode back into the room.

"Now what's the meaning of all this?" he demanded viciously.

"Take this chair," invited Charlebois coolly. "This one opposite Mr. Gordon here."

With a gulp that seemed almost one of amazement at his own acquiescence, the other obeyed.

"I see that you do not remember me, or, perhaps, to be more accurate, do not recognize me," remarked Charlebois imperturbably.

"No; I do not!" rasped Poindexter. "But I would like to call your attention to the fact that time is an expensive commodity with me."

The faintest of smiles crossed the little old gentleman's lips.

"I venture to think that it is equally so in my case," he returned evenly; "and of late perhaps even more so than with you. However, I have no wish to detain you here an unnecessary moment. You do not recognize me? Well, no matter! I think you will before I am through. I want you to listen to a little story. Some twenty years ago there was a man who lived in a little town in the Middle West. I imagine he was

about thirty-five years old then. He kept a small and, I fear, unprofitable general store." Charlebois paused.

Gordon raised his head suddenly. Poindexter, with a muttered growl, stared at Gordon, then settled heavily in his chair and glared at Charlebois. Stranway, at a slight nod from the little old gentleman, moved unostentatiously to the end of the desk between the two, facing Charlebois, who stood at the other end.

"This man," Charlebois resumed, "was of a mechanical turn of mind. He invented and patented an attachment for a lathe. I am not versed in such matters, and I do not pretend to say just what it was. In any case, it is immaterial now, except that it was of real value. This secured him an opening with a machine company, and he gave up the general store. The years went on, he added other patents to the first, gave all that was in him to the business, and, little by little, as he saved money, invested those savings in the company's stock, and eventually he rose to the presidency of the concern."

"Quite a pretty homily!" sneered Mr. John K. Poindexter.

"Quite," agreed Charlebois, nodding his head gravely. "About this time a certain group of promoters, who had acquired control of most of the machine interests in the country, decided that they wanted the patents of this company. They made an offer to purchase the company outright, with a threat to help themselves to it if the offer was refused—and their offer, as they meant it to be, was so low that there was no possibility of its acceptance. It had the desired effect, however. It frightened a lot of small shareholders. The trust bought their shares—trans-

ferred in blank to cover the operation until the trust was ready to show its hand; but, also, the trust took the precaution to have the stock accompanied by proxies made out in the same manner so that the stock could be voted at any time though the original holders still appeared on the company's books." Again Charlebois paused for an instant, and his sharp little steel-blue eyes rested grimly on Poindexter. "Like mechanics," he murmured, "I am not versed in matters of high finance, but I trust I am making myself clear. The president at this time owned thirty per cent of the stock, and he took up the fight against the 'steal' —both as a matter of principle and to save himself. I shall not attempt to trace in detail what followed. By pledging his stock to the bank he obtained a loan. With this loan he bought other stock, got a further loan on that, and bought still more—pyramiding, I believe you term it. At first he had no difficulty in obtaining shares, and at a low price. Then the market began to tighten. The shares went up and up until they rose to an incredible figure"—Charlebois' hand went suddenly to his pocket—"and one lot, the block of twenty-five shares that I hold here, went for —*fifty thousand dollars.*"

Livid-faced, Poindexter leaped to his feet.

"Let me see that certificate!" he cried hoarsely.

Charlebois spread it out on the desk.

Poindexter bent over it. "That's mine!" he shouted furiously, the next instant. "You're a thief, or worse than a thief! That's mine, do you hear? That's——"

"Sit down!" ordered Charlebois sternly.

"I won't! I——" Poindexter's voice broke in a snarl, as, at a motion from the little old gentleman, Stranway jerked the magnate back into his chair.

"You are interrupting my story," said Charlebois coldly. "There came a day when all the shares were in the hands of two men—the president of the company and the head of the trust. The president was heavily involved; what real estate he had was mortgaged, he had borrowed on personal notes where he could, his stock was pledged to the bank to secure his loans, every resource was gone in his desperate fight—and he had lost by less than twenty-five shares, egged on to ruin with remorseless cunning by the other side because he had dared to oppose them. He was ruined, penniless, in debt. The trust had now only to demand a meeting of the shareholders and vote to sell the company to itself, for it held, until this certificate came into my possession, the majority of stock, but" —Charlebois turned the certificate over, took out his fountain pen and began to fill in the blank line—"but with an——"

"You write any name but mine as the transferee of that stock and I'll put you behind the bars!" yelled Poindexter in a furor, jumping to his feet again. "It's forgery! It's felony! You stole it, you—you——" His voice trailed off apoplectically.

Charlebois completed the signature, brushed the certificate to the far side of the desk away from Poindexter's reach, and took a step suddenly toward the other. The steel-blue eyes were hard as flint, and before them Poindexter fell back a pace. And now Gordon, too, was on his feet, leaning heavily against the desk, his face, a little color back in it, full of changing expressions—a dawning hope, fear, wonder and amazement each struggling for the mastery.

For a tense moment the tableau held, then Charlebois' voice, addressing Poindexter, rang through the room.

"You!" he cried in cold fury. "You should be upon your knees thanking your God that this man's blood is not upon your soul! I found him with a pistol at his head fifteen minutes ago. Does that affect you any? Or are you too calloused? Is money too omnipotently your only god?" Charlebois' words were coming now in short, quick, deadly sentences. "I am a thief, you say! This is your certificate, you say! But the trap worked well, did it not, and you liked the bait? Even you, with all your money, were greedy for fifty thousand dollars—if it could be yours with so little effort. Fifty thousand dollars for twenty-five shares! You laughed in your sleeve at the poor fool who would offer that. You could spare those twenty-five shares and still have a majority of the stock—*if those twenty-five shares were not voted.* It was too ridiculously easy; and fifty thousand dollars at a hand's turn was—fifty thousand dollars. You refused the offer, of course, for you could not afford to appear in the matter personally; but, nevertheless, you must not let fifty thousand dollars slip through your fingers. You had two things to consider: you must not be known in the transaction; and the shares must not be voted at the meeting. After the meeting it did not matter; the West County Tool and Machine Company would have lost its entity. I did not know how you would snatch at the bait. I only knew, for I knew you, that the bait was irresistible. You refused the offer of the man who visited you; and then you sent your secretary to him to——"

"You lie!" shrieked Poindexter wildly. "I did nothing of the kind. I had no hand in it. He's a scoundrel, a thief! He's played me false, he——"

"You anticipate a little—*dangerously*—do you not?" Charlebois interrupted in the same merciless

tones. "This certificate was not stolen. It was *sold* by your instructions. Your secretary was coached by you in his part. He was to say that he had overheard the offer, that for the sum mentioned, *in cash,* he would undertake to get the shares, to steal them from you and——"

Stranway, with a quick, involuntary movement, leaned across the table toward Charlebois.

"Steener!" he gasped out. "You say Steener was in the game? Oh, good Lord!"

"Ah!" said Charlebois whimsically. "You, eh, my boy? And your conscience? Is that it? I had not heard the details, but I take it Steener played his part with commendable realism." He turned again sharply to Poindexter. "But I am encroaching on your valuable time. Let us bring this interview to an end. You planned to have the stock turned over too late to be used to-day here in Cleveland, but the purchaser was not to know that, naturally. He asked your secretary the date of this meeting at the time the 'theft' was being planned. Your secretary said he did not know; he said that as you now had control it remained with you to demand a meeting when you would, but that legal notice would have to be given to the shareholders. He stated that he did not know whether this notice had been given or not, but that of course Mr. Gordon here would know. He suggested that a wire be sent to Mr. Gordon asking for that information. That was really your cleverest move, Poindexter, your cleverest move—and for such gratification as it may afford you, I will admit that it was almost successful. The wire was sent—but Mr. Gordon, though still president, never received it. Some scoundrel of yours in these offices here in Cleveland —whom I trust Mr. Gordon will in due course unearth

and deal with as he deserves—was on the watch for it, intercepted it, and wired back, signing Mr. Gordon's name, saying that the meeting was called for the eighteenth—that is, to-morrow—whereas, in reality, it was set for to-day. And your secretary had promised to deliver the shares last night, which was ample time in which to get them here for the—*eighteenth*. I knew——"

"My God!" interjected Gordon, in a hoarse, passionate whisper. He was swaying on his feet, reaching out with a queer, slow, ominous movement of his hands across the desk toward Poindexter.

Charlebois stepped instantly toward him and forced him back.

"Leave this matter in my hands, Gordon; do not interfere," he said sharply, but not unkindly. He faced Poindexter again. "I knew, of course, that you were up to some crooked work, that you did not for a minute intend to allow those shares to go where they could do you any harm—even for fifty thousand dollars—but just what form your rascality was to take I did not know. You left New York for Cleveland last night. I left with you on the same train. You say you do not recognize me. I thank you for the unconscious compliment, for you have met me under rather intimate conditions on *two* occasions. Do you remember the little Jewish gentleman who made you the offer in the first place? He was rather coarse in manner and seedy in appearance, but he had the money with him—in cash. You had no hesitancy in concluding he would be a willing party to a theft —or anything else that would enable him to get what he was offering fifty thousand dollars to obtain."

Poindexter was clawing at the table with his hand.

His face had lost much of its scarlet hue. A sweat bead glistened on his forehead.

"It's a lie!" he said gutturally.

"Well, then, do you remember," Charlebois went on in a voice whose very mildness enhanced its menace, "the innocuous little clergyman, who listened so humbly and with such awe and admiration to the great man's dissertations last night in the Pullman? Do you remember enlightening him ponderously on the intricacies of corporations and their control, very highly pleased with the impression you created? The little man was almost overwhelmed with your presence —with the thought of conversing so familiarly with the great John K. Poindexter, was he not? Do you remember, while dwelling on the subject of corporations, that you casually, with a casual wave of your hand, mentioned, without naming it specifically, a merger, or so you were pleased to term it, that you were about to effect *this morning?* And why should you not? You were already far from New York on the last train out of there for Cleveland; and your companion was so gratifyingly ingenuous, so appreciative of the condescension that you graciously accorded him—he would speak of John K. Poindexter in glowing terms ever after! Do you recognize me now? Yes, I see you do. Your game became clear then. Your hand was on the table. The meeting was to be twenty-four hours ahead of the time given in the forged telegram from Mr. Gordon. The rest was very simple—a wire to New York from the train's first stop—and in response a 'special' that has brought us"—he laid his hand on the stock certificate—"this little piece of paper, and its accompanying proxy."

"It's a lie!" choked Poindexter. "A lie! A lie!"

"Your vocabulary seems strangely stunted compared

with last night," said Charlebois calmly. "But the game is up. I have witnesses who overheard you when you drilled Steener in the part he was to play—and I have Steener's confession."

"Steener's—confession!" The words came in gulps from Poindexter.

"Exactly!" said Charlebois. He drew a telegram from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. "Steener was in my hands within twenty minutes after he had turned over this certificate last night. That telegram, received on the train this morning, informs me that he was *persuaded* to sign a statement of fact before a notary public. You should know Steener's caliber well enough to enable you to form your own opinion as to whether that is true or not; but you are permitted to doubt if you choose—until you can verify it."

Poindexter snatched up the telegram, read it, swallowed hard once or twice, laid it down, scowled at Gordon, and then shook his fist under Charlebois' nose.

"I don't know who in the fiend's name you are," he spluttered fiercely; "but I'll make it my business to find out, you understand? Meanwhile, I know when I'm beaten. I'll get you another time, Gordon. Go on with your meeting; I won't embarrass you with my presence. And you"—he shook his fist at Charlebois again—"I'm not through with you, either! You get that, don't you?" He jerked his chair away, and started for the door.

"I admire a good loser," said Charlebois grimly. "But just a moment before you go, Mr. Poindexter! There is one other little matter."

Poindexter swung around with an ugly scowl.

"Well?" he growled out. "What is it?"

"I believe you bank at the Fourteenth National, do you not?" inquired Charlebois pleasantly, as he extracted a slip of paper from his pocket, laid it on the desk and extended his fountain pen invitingly to the other.

"What's that?" demanded Poindexter roughly.

"When you have signed it," replied the little old gentleman softly, "it will be a check on the Fourteenth National Bank, payable to bearer, for forty-four thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars."

Poindexter's cheeks puffed in and out, and his face grew scarlet again.

"Sign that!" he fairly screamed, his rage pitching his voice in a high falsetto. "Sign that! You—you blackmailing, highway robber, you—you——" He choked. "I'll—I'll see you damned first!" he ended fervently.

"The par value of this stock," said Charlebois in a musing tone, picking up the certificate, "is one hundred dollars. It was due to your own machinations that the price was forced upward, and that you paid, I believe, considerably more for this particular block —to be exact, so I am credibly informed, two hundred and ten dollars a share. I am afraid I am overgenerous, but I prefer to err in that regard rather than in any other. You will receive exactly what you paid for it. Twenty-five shares at two hundred and ten dollars per share is five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars. The difference between that amount and fifty thousand dollars is—forty-four thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars. Have I made a mistake?"

"You have!" roared Poindexter. "You have, if you think I'm fool enough to make you a present of forty-four thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars!

I thought you said a minute ago that I *sold* you that stock—well, you've got it, haven't you?"

"You knew what I wanted it for," said Charlebois quietly. "If you had handed it over without attempting to rob me of its value by juggling the date of the meeting I should have been well content to have paid the price I offered—fifty thousand dollars. As it is——"

"As it is," broke in Mr. Poindexter, with a sneer—Mr. Poindexter was getting a grip on himself again, "you have paid fifty thousand dollars."

"As it is," continued Charlebois, as though he had not heard the interruption, "unless you sign that check I shall sue you for the amount on the ground of obtaining money under false pretenses."

"Haw! Haw, haw!" guffawed Mr. Poindexter. "Why, you senile old fool, you couldn't win a suit like that in a million years! You admitted yourself before these witnesses that you bought the stock at your own price."

"H'm," said Charlebois gravely. "Yes; that is true. I am inclined to agree with you. I doubt very seriously if a court would uphold my claim."

"Well, then," snorted Mr. Poindexter, "why did you try to ram a fool bluff like that down my throat?"

"It is not a bluff," said the little old gentleman patiently. "I should still sue—for the sake of *publicity*. I have too high a regard for the financiers of this country to accept you as a type. I prefer to believe that the majority of the moneyed men, your associates, are too high principled to look with favor on such shady transactions as they would then know you to be capable of; and as for the others, those of your own ilk, I imagine that in their eyes your sin would be the most grievous you could have committed—the

sin of *failure,* with its accompanying loss of prestige, and, I fancy too, a modicum of ridicule that I understand the 'street' knows how to make the most of." Charlebois paused and smiled deprecatingly. "I fear," he murmured, "that I have stated the case poorly. You are perhaps better able than I to judge just what exposure would——"

Poindexter's face was mottled.

"Have I your pledge," he gurgled, "that nothing will be known of this matter if I—I sign that check?"

"You have," said Charlebois, his tones cold again.

"Give me the pen," snarled Poindexter.

He scrawled his name across the bottom of the check, flung the pen upon the desk—and the next instant the door banged behind him.

Slowly Gordon turned and faced Charlebois.

"I don't know what this means," he said brokenly. "I only know that an hour ago I was a ruined man and—and that I had lost the courage to fight it any longer. I've a wife and a little girl, almost a woman, and—and you have saved them—and me. I cannot thank you, no words could do that; but tell me who you are so that I——"

"Tut, tut," said the little old gentleman brusquely, beginning suddenly to lose his sang-froid and squirm uneasily. "There are no thanks required, for no thanks are due. My name is of no consequence. I have simply liquidated a debt I owed you. Here, take this!" He thrust the stock certificate and proxy hurriedly into the other's hand. "This gives you control. You have nothing more to fear from Poindexter."

"A debt? A debt?" said Gordon blankly, accepting the papers mechanically. "You owed me a debt?" He shook his head. "I do not know of any."

"Yes," said Charlebois sharply, as though his veracity were being assailed and he were taking umbrage at it. "Yes, sir; a debt! Do you remember, when you kept that general store, that you gave a meal and a night's lodging to a ragged, pitiful wretch who came to you one night? Do you remember that you sent him away the next morning with a pair of shoes, a cheery smile, and a grip of the hand that gave him new courage and new heart? Well, sir, I am that poor devil."

"A pair of shoes!" The words came weakly from Gordon. His eyes fell on the certificate in his hand, and he held it suddenly closer to him, staring at it in amazement. "It's—it's transferred to me!" he faltered. His eyes filled suddenly with tears, and he stretched out his hands to Charlebois. "I don't understand it," he said huskily. "I don't pretend to understand it—a pair of shoes! What can I say? I do not understand it, but God bless you over and over again, and——"

"No! No-no-no!" cried the strange little old gentleman, quite panic-stricken now. "No! I—I cannot have thanks. Here, Stranway, my boy, here!" He jerked Gordon's revolver out from his pocket and pushed it into Stranway's hand. "Here, keep him here, even if you have to use this, until I—until I am gone"—and with his short, quick little steps Henri Raoul Charlebois rushed incontinently from the room.

For a moment, as Gordon leaned forward and buried his face in his hands, Stranway did not move; then he laid the revolver quietly down on the desk, and walked slowly toward the door. He was conscious that somehow his month in Dominic Court had, in the last half hour, crystallized into something of fuller, deeper, more worth-while significance than he

had known before. He stepped into the hall, closed the door softly behind him—and a smile, one now of a new and strange affection, lighted up his face.

Down the corridor, the little old gentleman was punching frantically at every elevator bell within reach.

CHAPTER VII

A MATTER OF IDENTITY

WHO was the Orchid?

Stranway crunched the end of his cigarette abstractedly in the ash tray on the café table, as he stared through the window at the rather shabby street without. Who was she? Where was she? It was almost a month now since he had found her waiting for him in his car on the night when, with Steener as his accomplice, he had "robbed" Poindexter's safe, and during that time there had been no sign of her.

Perhaps it was the very mystery surrounding her that intrigued and plagued him, and, if he were quite honest with himself, obliged him to admit that she was less and less out of his thoughts as the days went by. Who was she? Where was she? There had been a constant whirl of events, and many strange, and, on occasions, hazardous incidents which meanwhile had centered around that bizarre Red Room in 2½ Dominic Court, and he had seen "active service" almost a score of times—but never the Orchid. Why?

He shook his head. Charlebois on that score was as uncommunicative as ever. All that he, Stranway, had to go on was the memory of the only two occasions on which he had seen her, and from his standpoint those meetings had not been at all satisfactory. Very far from it, indeed! He smiled suddenly—half grimly, half whimsically. His mind was fully made up that the same sort of thing would not happen again! The next time, no matter what the circum-

stances, he was going to know a lot more about a certain brown-eyed and tantalizing young woman, who of late had been so woefully disturbing his peace of mind!

Next time! When would that be? He had been expecting it, hoping for it every day since that last time—and it had never come.

"Oh, damn it," murmured Stranway fervently to himself, "what's the use!"

He lighted another cigarette, and, determined to divert his thoughts, tried to rivet his attention on the scene outside the window. Pushcarts lined the curb everywhere, some piled high with fruit, and some with vegetables, and some with fish, and some with merchandise too miscellaneous for inventory; and, while the hawkers screamed their wares and buyers haggled over their purchases, the scantily clad children, playing in the gutters, scrambled under the pushcarts for any pickings that might fall from the heaped-up treasures above. And always a motley crowd moved slowly on the sidewalk—composed for the most part of swarthy-faced men who wore ear-rings, and old women who wore dark shawls, and young women who went to the extreme in vivid colors that clashed violently. It was one of the "foreign sections" of the city. Usually he found it intensely interesting; there had been occasions even when he had sat for an hour at a stretch at this same table in Talimini's Café absorbed in exactly the same scene that was being enacted out there now. But to-night, somehow, it did not interest him at all.

He turned a little irritably in his chair, and his eyes strayed around the interior of the café itself. Talimini's was Bohemian in the extreme. It was never somber; and Talimini who, according to his own story,

had once been under-chef to the reigning house of Italy, substantiated his story to such a practical degree, at least, that the dinner he served was always rewarded with crowded tables.

Just south of Washington Square, the café was not far from Dominic Court, and, once discovered by Stranway weeks ago, had since then become a favorite dining place of his. To-night was in no way different from any other night—but to-night, the gaiety and laughter, the chatter, often in strange tongues, that arose from the innumerable small tables around him, the really excellent violin that formed the backbone of the orchestra, and, indeed, the whole ensemble of the place with its air of vivacity and good-humor which usually he very thoroughly enjoyed, now seemed only to bore and weary him.

"What the devil is the matter with me?" he muttered savagely.

He took out his watch—and, frowning suddenly in surprise, stared at it for an instant before returning it to his pocket. The time, after all, must have gone more quickly than he had imagined, for though he had entered the café well ahead of the hour appointed by Charlebois, it was now five minutes past that hour. It was rather strange! Charlebois was late. He had never known such a thing to happen before. The little old gentleman of Dominic Court was the soul of punctuality—prided himself upon it, indeed; and even drastically insisted upon it from others.

Stranway lighted another cigarette, and his eyes fastened now on the street entrance across the intervening tables. He was quite sure Charlebois had not come in, for, though the café was already pretty well crowded, Charlebois knew that he, Stranway, always reserved the same table, or at least one of

the group that was always served by the same waiter, and would have come directly to him. There could not be any mistake about the message—it was quite clear, quite plain. It had been telephoned from Dominic Court to an office downtown which he, Stranway, was to visit during the course of the afternoon, and, on his arrival there the message had been transmitted to him. He repeated it mentally now: "Six-thirty at Talimini's—Charlebois will meet you there for dinner. Important." There could hardly have been any mistake about the hour!

He kept his eyes steadily on the doorway now, but as the minutes passed and still Charlebois did not appear, Stranway found himself becoming more and more disquieted and uneasy. Ordinarily, the fact that a man was a few minutes late in keeping an appointment was a matter of no consequence whatever; it was trivial even, something to be passed off with a smiling excuse and apology—but not so in the case of Henri Raoul Charlebois. Charlebois was *never* late; and he, Stranway, in his two months of close intimacy with the little old gentleman of Dominic Court, was only too keenly alive to the fact that always and ever, lurking just around the corner, danger, sometimes subtle, sometimes clumsy, but always brutal, vicious and determined, stalked at Charlebois' heels, as those whose names were on the debit side of the Red Ledger struck back in an effort to free themselves from the net that was being drawn around them. He had good reason to be anxious. This was not like Charlebois at all. Something must have happened to the little old gentleman, for, otherwise, if Charlebois had been merely detained by some ordinary cause, he would almost certainly have sent a message to the café.

Stranway glanced at his watch again. It was ten minutes past the hour now. What would he better do? He did not like the situation at all. Talimini's telephone was rather public, and if anything *were* wrong, and he himself were being watched, it would be— Ah! Stranway relaxed in his chair with a smile of relief. There were a number of tables between himself and the door, and a group of people were now seating themselves around several of these, so that his view for the moment was somewhat obscured; but here, surely, was Charlebois at last—that little old gentleman who had just entered, and who was hidden now for an instant by the laughing crowd that seemed unable to decide among themselves who their individual table mates were to be, was Charlebois, wasn't it? And so, after all, his uneasiness had been groundless. Well, thank the Lord, it had! Charlebois, that strange, lovable, complex, yet intensely human character, had found a large place in his, Stranway's, heart, and the relationship between them had already become—

With a warning cry that mingled despair and fury Stranway was on his feet—too late. Stilling the laughter, the talk, the boisterous gaiety of the place for a moment into shocked and terrified silence, save only for that one cry from Stranway, came the roar of a revolver shot, another and another, as a man at the table nearest the door fired three times in rapid succession at the little old gentleman—and then, leaping for the door, dashed through it to the street.

Chairs and their occupants went down before Stranway's frantic rush. Without ceremony, heedless of everything, he forced his way between tables, between the groups seated in his path, ruthlessly brushing them aside. It had come at last—mocking with

ghastly derision, as it were, the swift, amazing master-moves with which the little old gentleman of Dominic Court had hitherto fenced and turned aside and frustrated all previous attempts upon his life.

The café was in a wild, panic-stricken furor now; men shouted, women screamed; waiters and those nearer the scene of the tragedy than Stranway packed forward ahead of him in a dense ring around the form on the floor. Passion, fury, grief stabbed at him, making of him temporarily a madman—and like a madman he fought his way through the jam.

He burst through the circle, dropped on his knees beside the motionless, outstretched figure—and stared wildly into the white, upturned face. Relief, incredible, so overpowering as almost for the instant to leave him weak and helpless, swept upon him— *it was not Charlebois.* There was a resemblance, much of it, enough of it, owing to the restricted view and the distance across the room, to have deceived even him when he had seen the other enter; but then, of course, he had been expecting Charlebois, and the little old gentleman's street clothes were rarely twice alike. The man was of about the same age, the same build as Charlebois; and, like Charlebois, had blue eyes and silvery hair—but it was not Charlebois.

But Stranway was in action now, and, on his feet again in an instant, he sprang through the door and out into the street. The man who had fired the shots could not have got very far away as yet, and Stranway was morally certain he could identify the other again if he but got a glimpse of him—the man was slim, tall, fair-haired, and was wearing a light-gray suit.

Five minutes' search, however, from one end of the block to the other resulted in—nothing. Talimini's, the locality, was a well chosen spot! The hawkers,

the heterogeneous mass of people and pushcarts that crowded the pavements and the curbs, had swallowed the man up effectually.

Stranway returned to the café, and elbowed his way inside through the crowd that had collected at the door. Some degree of order had been restored, but the place still seethed with commotion and excitement. A man, a doctor evidently from his professional actions, probably one who had been among the guests, was on his knees beside the man who had been shot. A little group, in which every one talked at once, eagerly recounted what had happened to a police officer. The doctor looked up and shook his head gravely in response to an inquiry from the policeman.

"Can't tell till we get him to the hospital," he said. "He has a chance—a bare chance, I should say."

Some one pressed Stranway's elbow with a light but significant touch.

"I am here, my boy," said a quiet voice in his ear.

It was the voice and the sharp, steel-blue eyes of Henri Raoul Charlebois that Stranway recognized—nothing else proclaimed the other's identity. The neatly dressed gentleman beside him, brown-haired, mustached, bearded, marvellous in his make-up, might readily have passed for a well-preserved man of forty.

Before Stranway could respond, the officer spoke again, raising his voice and waving his hand toward the wounded man:

"Anybody here come in with this gentleman, or know who he is?"

There was no answer, and Stranway leaned close to Charlebois.

"I think we would better get out of here," he said in a low tone. "I'll go and get my hat."

Charlebois agreeing with a slight nod, Stranway made his way back to his table.

"Emile," he said to the man who regularly waited upon him, "get my hat for me as quickly as you can, please."

"Monsieur will not dine here, then, to-night?" asked the man.

"No," Stranway replied. "Not to-night. Hurry, Emile."

The man was back in a moment, and, as he politely extended the hat, took from his pocket an envelope which he also handed to Stranway.

"What's this?" demanded Stranway.

"I do not know." Emile smiled and lifted his shoulders. "It was left by a gentleman this afternoon, who said you would dine here to-night, and that I was to give it to you—but not until you were going away."

"Not until I was going away!" echoed Stranway in astonishment.

"Yes," said Emile. "That is what he said. It is perhaps a joke, I do not know—I am innocent of it—monsieur knows I would not take liberties."

Stranway tore the envelope open, and as he read the words that were scrawled on the sheet of paper he had found therein, his lips straightened into a grim line. He put the note back into the envelope, and the envelope into his pocket.

"All right," he said unconcernedly, as he slipped a coin into the waiter's hand. "Good-night, Emile."

CHAPTER VIII

THE COUNTERMOVE

THEY were lifting the wounded man into an ambulance, as Stranway joined Charlebois again and both stepped out to the street—but it was not until they had reached the corner of the block and had turned north, heading for Washington Square, that Stranway spoke.

"My God, it was *you* they meant to kill!" he said hoarsely.

"Yes, my boy," said Charlebois soberly. "I am afraid it was."

"I received a telephone message while I was at Klinehart & Heager's office that purported to come from Dominic Court"—the words came fast from Stranway—"saying that you would meet me for dinner at Talimini's at six-thirty."

"A district messenger boy delivered the same message from you to me at the Court an hour ago," said Charlebois quietly.

Stranway jerked the note Emile had given him from his pocket.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed passionately. "It was left at the café for this afternoon—to be given to me *when I went away*. That means when I had seen the murder done. Listen! This is what it says: 'Is this warning enough for you not to meddle with things that do not concern you, or are you—next?' " Stranway crushed the note in his hand and jabbed it back into his pocket. "The hell-hounds!" he burst

out fiercely. "It's unbelievable! The message you got that was signed by me was neither more nor less than an invitation to your own death—the one I got by telephone an invitation to see you done away with. It failed—but it has cost a life. I saw it in that poor chap's face—he'll never live the night out. I——" Stranway's voice choked with anger, and a clenched hand swept his eyes.

"My boy," said the little old gentleman softly, "calm yourself. It is quite true, I think, that we are dealing with one of the most cold-blooded and ingenious scoundrels I have ever known, and I have known many—but the game is not yet played out."

"No," rasped Stranway bluntly; "but it would have been, except for the chance that you were a little late and in disguise."

A quizzical light was in the steel-blue eyes as Charlebois turned his head toward Stranway.

"Chance," he said gently, "is a word of many meanings: the toying with the responsibilities of life; the whine and complaint of the fallen weak; the noisy, empty boast of those upon whom fortune has smiled through no efforts of their own. But to us, who face danger daily, hourly, there is no such word as chance."

For a moment Stranway stared searchingly into Charlebois' face.

"You—you *knew?*" he gasped.

"Yes," said Charlebois, with his grave, contained smile. "I knew that my life was to be attempted—but not that another man would be mistaken for me."

Stranway's hands were clenched at his sides. He made no answer.

They had reached Washington Square and Charlebois now headed toward Broadway.

"I'm going to the hospital," said the little old

gentleman almost absently. "Poor fellow! Innocently enough perhaps, but in a way through me, I fear, he has come to his death." His face hardened suddenly, and he reverted abruptly to his former remark. "I said I knew that this attempt was to be made upon my life, but I must qualify that somewhat. Shortly after I received the message supposed to be from you, I was warned to be careful to-night. The warning came from one of our men—Creeler—who for over a year now has been detailed to the Stolman case."

"Stolman?" Stranway repeated the word slowly. "I know the name," he said. "And I have seen the man—you pointed him out to me one day. It is a debit entry in the Red Ledger; but I have never had anything to do with the case itself, you know."

"We will not take the time to go into that now, for there is work for you to do," said Charlebois quickly; "and it is a long story, and not a pleasant one. Let us confine ourselves for the present to the immediate issues. Creeler, to a certain extent, has become an intimate of Stolman—though not so fully in Stolman's confidence as I would wish. Creeler telephoned me that, from words and hints dropped by Stolman, he was sure Stolman had planned a trap that would get rid of me to-night; but what that trap was he did not know and had not been able to find out." The little old gentleman flung out his arms with a curious, deprecating gesture. "And so it was not 'chance,' you see, my boy. I was in Talimini's when you arrived. Flint was with me, also in disguise; and Flint, even ahead of you, was out of the café and after the man who fired the shot—I think we can safely leave that end of the matter in Flint's hands."

"It was not Stolman who fired the shots," declared

Stranway emphatically. "I saw the man, and——"

"No, my boy, it was not Stolman." Charlebois shook his head, smiling without mirth. "If it had been Stolman no mistake would have been made. The shots were fired, it is evident enough, by some one who did not know me personally—a professional gunman, I should say, a type of which the underworld here in this city is all too full; so full, in fact, that even his price is low, and I believe twenty-five dollars would purchase a man's death at any time. Let us see, then! Stolman makes his bargain, and describes the man who is to be done away with as a short, elderly gentleman, white-haired, blue-eyed, who will enter Talimini's at about six-thirty—that is enough, is it not, for the assassin? There was not likely to be another man closely answering that description who would enter the café at approximately the same hour—yet strangely enough that was exactly what happened, and we have seen the consequences. As for your participation in the affair, there are two reasons. First, by using you, Stolman was employing the surest means that suggested itself to him of luring me to the cafe; second, while he can have no comprehensive knowledge of the scope of the organization, he evidently knows you as—shall we say?—my 'next in command,' and, once I was out of the way, counted on the object lesson of my death having a lasting and, from his standpoint, salutary effect on your future actions. So far it is clear, unquestionably clear, and we come now to the question—why? For years I have watched him; and for years, unfortunately for me, he has known it. I pass over the fact as self-evident that he would murder me for hate alone, but is there any significance in the attempt having been made *to-night* rather than at any other time?"

Charlebois walked nearly half a block before he spoke again, while Stranway kept pace beside him, respecting the other's silence.

"I do not know," said the little old gentleman, answering his own question at last; "but I believe there is. Early this summer Stolman rented a cottage on a lonely part of the beach near Far Rockaway. I have not been able to discover why. He seldom went near it, and then always alone; but invariably on these occasions he would have a visitor before he left who would stay an hour or so, but that was all. Apart from that, the cottage has been entirely deserted. He went there again this afternoon—alone. I sent Rainier and Sewell to watch him. Creeler, of course, was useless there because Stolman knows him as a friend, and he plainly intimated to Creeler that he desired no company on a little trip he was making out of town. If he is meditating anything for to-night the trump cards are ours, and we must be prepared to play out any game he may initiate. The wounded man was not identified by any one, so there is no reason for any other word to reach Stolman than that I am either dead or very seriously wounded. He has no reason to believe that the slightest suspicion would be directed against him, for he was out of town when the shooting occurred. On the other hand, he may suspect that the customary watch is being kept on him at Far Rockaway; but, too, he may well count on the news of my death bringing back post-haste to the city whoever might be there. That is logical, is it not? Very well, we will play into his hands. It will be positive evidence to him that I am out of the way. I will send some one out there in an hour, not too hastily, to recall Rainier and Sewell, and I think we can trust to them performing the maneuver ostentatiously enough to

convince Stolman that, so far as he is concerned, we have thrown up our hands for more vital matters—the running down of my murderer."

"And then?" asked Stranway tensely—they had come to Broadway and had halted on the corner at the curb.

"And then," said Charlebois quietly, "you will take their place, my boy—and we shall see! It is seven o'clock now, and you have an hour yet. Get your dinner, and then go to your Sixth Avenue rooms. Stolman knows you, and you must be exceedingly careful in your disguise. Leave your rooms at eight. If I have any further instructions in the meantime I will send them to you. Once out there, there will be help at hand if you require it. You will have no trouble in finding the house—it is known as the MacKellar Cottage." He laid his hand on Stranway's shoulder. "It is understood? If so, I will take this car that is coming."

"It is understood," Stranway answered briefly.

"Good, my boy!" said the little old gentleman with a quick, satisfied nod of his head; and then, with an affectionate pressure of his fingers on Stranway's shoulder, he turned abruptly away, stepped into the street and swung, with the agility of the man of forty that he appeared to be, aboard a passing car.

CHAPTER IX

STRANWAY RECEIVES A PACKAGE

STOLMAN—who was Stolman? Stranway ate a hasty dinner at a near-by restaurant, his mind far more occupied with that question than with his food. Stolman ran a chain of pawnshops on the lower East Side. That is, they were ostensibly pawnshops; but it was more than probable, it lacked only the proof, that he was the most successful fence in New York—the Mecca of the city thieves with their stolen gains. That much Stranway knew. But who was Stolman that his name should be amongst those on the Red Ledger's pages? What was between this man and Charlebois that had caused the tragedy he had just witnessed? Under what grim circumstances in the days long gone had these two met before? And the end? Why this lonely cottage, visited at rare and infrequent intervals? What was behind it all? What did the night still hold in store?

From the restaurant, Stranway went at once to his second-floor apartment on Sixth Avenue, and, still revolving these questions and a score of others, in his mind, busied himself in the preparations Charlebois had instructed him to make. He worked rapidly, but it lacked only five minutes of eight when he finally emerged from his dressing-room; and it was but a moment or two later when, at the sound of an automobile stopping in the street below, he stepped to one of the front windows, drew aside the curtain, and,

looking out, saw that a large, closed car was drawn up at the curb.

The game was on—whatever it might prove to be!

A little grimly, he let the curtain fall back into place, stepped over to the desk in the corner of the living-room, opened a drawer, took out his automatic, and, slipping the weapon into his pocket, closed the drawer again. Some one was knocking at the door—knocking again. He turned around and leaned nonchalantly against the desk.

"Come!" he called—and then in a flash his nonchalance vanished, and he sprang eagerly forward. Something was thudding at his brain with sudden hammer blows. The next time . . . the next time . . . ! *This* was the next time—when he had least expected it—when it had been farthest from his thoughts! He felt the red flame into his cheeks. It was the Orchid! "You—you!" he cried.

She stood in the doorway—the slim, graceful figure all in black, the delicate purple orchid at her corsage—smiling at him with those wide brown eyes that lighted up her features so wondrously—the Orchid! It was the face, the eyes, the smile, the figure that of late had haunted him in his waking and his sleeping hours—the woman whose identity, whose name even, he did not know—who in the last few months had tantalized him almost to the verge of madness with her elusiveness. And now, beautiful, mysterious, inscrutable, she stood before him again. But this was his "next time"—when he had promised himself she should *not* elude him—not go out of his life until another "next time" with just a few hurriedly spoken words that told him nothing of what he most wanted to know—herself; this time she should not go until he had in some measure at least broken down

the mysterious barrier that stood between them.

"You!" he said again—and, though disguised so far as all outward appearances went in readiness for the night's work, his eyes made no effort to disguise his eagerness.

A tinge of faintest pink crept to her cheeks.

"I would hardly have known you," she said in a little confusion.

Stranway's pulse quickened suddenly. He had never seen her just like this before—she had always been so sure of herself, so thoroughly the master of every situation. But now—this time—there seemed to be a new and glorious self-consciousness about her that—

"This is for you," she said hurriedly, thrusting a small package into his hand. "You will find all instructions there. You can read them on the way out—you are to go in the car."

"Yes; I understand," said Stranway quickly. "But that is strictly business, and"—he flashed a sudden quizzical smile at her—"if that's all on that subject, there's something I want to say to you on quite another that has been——"

"It's not all," she interrupted in a low voice. "I am to warn you to be particularly careful of—yourself. You are to play a desperate part, and there is the gravest danger."

The words brought Stranway a cold shock. *She* was playing a part, too, in the same game to-night!

He stepped impulsively toward her.

"And you?" he asked tensely.

She shook her head.

"Not to-night," she answered. "I have no further part in this to-night."

"Well, then, that's all right!" exclaimed Stranway in relief; then, stepping back invitingly from the door:

"Now, please, don't stand there on the threshold. There's a thousand and one things I want to ask you. There's——"

"It is eight o'clock," she said significantly. "You should have started by now. You will see when you have read those papers how vital it is that you should be on time."

"Yes; but look here!" protested Stranway earnestly. "That's all very well, but this sort of thing can't go on, you know, and——" He was staring at nothing more interesting than the closed door.

He could hear her running down the stairs. He stuffed the package he still held into his pocket, picked up his hat from the table, switched off the lights, groped his way to the door, jerked it open viciously, locked it behind him, and then raced down the stairs. He reached the front door, stepped out into the street, and stared in all directions around him. She was gone! Where no one else could have disappeared, she had vanished, was swallowed up in thin air!

He laughed a little savagely, then crossed the sidewalk and peered into the face of the man on the driver's seat of the car.

"You, eh, Creeler? Where's——" He stopped. It was quite useless!

"What?" asked Creeler, bending forward.

"Nothing!" said Stranway. "You've got your orders? You know where to go?"

"Yes," Creeler answered.

"Well, go on, then!" directed Stranway tersely, yanking the door open and springing into the body of the car.

He sank back on the cushions, and for a very long time after the car had started he did not stir from his position. The Orchid! Always, ever elusive—tor-

menting him, distracting him! Who was she? How had she come into the life of Henri Raoul Charlebois —into the life of the organization? Why was her identity kept a secret—why the mystery? How beautiful she was! His jaws snapped together—*next* time, no matter what the circumstances, what the surroundings, he would—his jaw fell a little—there had just been a "next" time, and he knew as much about her now as he had known before! And then Stranway shook his head. No, that wasn't so! Somehow, tonight everything was changed! A strange, wistful smile touched his lips. She was no longer merely an unsolved enigma—she was the one woman in the world.

Stranway came back with a start to a realization of the present. He pulled down the window curtains, and switched on the little dome-light in the car; then he took the package from his pocket, and opened it.

On top was a pile of crisp banknotes, held together by a rubber band. He counted the notes rapidly—they were all of hundred-dollar denomination—two hundred of them, twenty thousand dollars in all. He tossed them on the seat beside him, and took up one of the two envelopes, which, apart from the banknotes, was all that the package had contained.

The envelope was unsealed, and was addressed to "Herman Stolman, Esq." The brief note inside, dated from Vancouver, B. C., six days ago, ran:

"Dear Herm:—Barer is Sam Larson and he's O.K., and has the stuff. Couldn't send Trix this time because he's handed in his checks—drew a lead ace in a barroom up in Bonanza, Y. T., two months ago. Mix 'em up for Sam about equal—Yankee yellows and English 5's.

"Yrs.,——"

The signature was an absolutely undecipherable scrawl.

Stranway read the note over again—and yet once more. When he finally laid it down beside the bank-notes, his brows were gathered in a puzzled frown.

The other envelope was addressed to himself in the little old gentleman's crabbed hand. Stranway tore it open, extracted a closely-written sheet, and began to read it. And slowly the puzzled expression faded from his face, and a grim droop settled at the corners of his mouth.

He had lost track of time when finally the car stopped, and the door opened.

"You're within a three minutes' walk of the house," said Creeler in a low voice. "I don't dare take the car any nearer."

"Right!" said Stranway calmly, stepping to the ground. "Which way?"

"The cross-road to the left," Creeler answered. "It's the first house and the only one. Just around the turn."

It was very dark—and cool from the night breeze blowing from the ocean. Before he had taken half a dozen steps Stranway buttoned his coat tightly. From his left, the low, moaning throb of the waves rolling on the beach reached him.

Presently, rounding the turn, a single gleam of light cut suddenly through the darkness. Stranway headed for it, and a minute's brisk walk brought him to a house. He paused for a moment before it and listened. From near at hand came a plaintive sound —like a whippoorwill calling its mate.

CHAPTER X

THE DEBT

THREE steps led up to a verandah. Stranway mounted these, and, more by the sense of touch than sight, found the door and the bell. He rang the latter and waited.

A quick step sounded from inside the house, the door opened on a dark hallway without vestige of light within, and a man's voice spoke brusquely:

"Well?"

"Does Mr. Herman Stolman live here?" Stranway asked.

"Who are you?" demanded the voice sharply.

"If Mr. Stolman doesn't live here, I don't know that it really matters who I am," responded Stranway, with well-simulated tartness. "But Larson's my name —Sam Larson."

"Come in," said the voice instantly, and with a more friendly intonation. "I'm Stolman."

Stranway stepped promptly into the hall, and the door was closed. The other's hand fell upon his arm, guiding him forward.

Dark without, it was Egyptian blackness within— until suddenly, dazzled and half-blinded, blinking painfully, Stranway found himself standing on the threshold of a room whose door Stolman had thrown open. Lights seemed to dance everywhere before Stranway's eyes. It was a small room, but from the ceiling, from the corners, from the walls, glowed, not single lamps, but clusters of high-powered incandes-

cents—it was beyond question the most brilliantly lighted room he had ever been in. He stood there rubbing his eyes for an instant, then he turned nonchalantly to Stolman.

"Too bad you couldn't have shoved another light or two in here," he remarked facetiously.

"It's a fad of mine," said Stolman shortly.

Stranway's eyes, accustomed now to the glare, swept around the apartment. It was plainly furnished. There were a few chairs, and a table that stood just in front of an open fireplace where two huge logs crackled and blazed merrily—that was about all. The furniture was of the summer cottage variety—wicker. There was a window opposite the door, and Stranway noticed that the green roller shade was drawn down.

"So you're Larson, eh?" Stolman had shut the door, and now faced Stranway, eyeing him from head to foot.

"Sure—Larson," said Stranway absently, continuing to glance around the room.

"Well?" Stolman threw out the word curtly, tentatively.

"Eh?" inquired Stranway, as though still absorbed in his surroundings; then, with a little laugh: "Oh, sure! I forgot—I guess this is what you mean."

He took the envelope addressed to Stolman from his pocket, and handed it to the other; and then, as Stolman opened it and began to read, Stranway's eyes for the first time, and now but for a bare second, played critically over the man. Stolman was well-built, about his, Stranway's, height, with black eyes, black hair, and a shrewd, thin, cunning, clean-shaven face.

Stranway was again gazing with a puzzled expression at the extraordinary display of lights, when the

other, with a quick movement, suddenly thrust the note back at him.

"What's the signature on this paper?" snapped Stolman.

Stranway's eyes lowered, met Stolman's, and then a slow smile crept to his lips.

"Well," he drawled, "it depends on how you read it. Some would say it was Martin P. Adams, and some would say it was—Chuck MacAllister."

"Sit down," said Stolman affably. He drew a chair up to the table with his back to the fireplace, and motioned Stranway to one opposite to him. He took a couple of cigars from his pocket, tossed one over to Stranway, bit off the end of his own leisurely, and tilted back his chair.

Stranway as leisurely lighted his—and waited.

"Had a letter from Chuck some time ago saying you were coming," said Stolman easily, when his cigar was well alight. "And I got that letter you wrote me three days ago from"—he leaned forward a little in his chair—"let's see, where was it you wrote that letter from?"

Stranway was watching the blue spirals curl upward from the tip of his cigar.

"Chicago," said he complacently.

Stolman laughed shortly.

"I guess you're all right," he said briskly. "Well, let's get down to business. Flash your wad!"

Stranway reached promptly into his inside vest pocket, took out the bundle of banknotes and laid them on the table.

"How much?" inquired Stolman, deftly running his fingers through them.

"Twenty thousand," said Stranway.

"That's a hundred thousand of the queer," said

Stolman, getting up from his chair. "That's more than I've got left. Chuck knew about this lot in time enough—why didn't he send before?"

"I don't know," said Stranway, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That's his hunt. If you're low, he'll have to take what's left."

"It's mostly English," said Stolman. "All his special lot of that—no one else uses 'em."

"All right!" Stranway flicked the ash from his cigar toward the fireplace. "It's all the same! Give me what you've got—it's easy enough to salt a Canadian port with English stuff. What with the tourists and shipping, even the banks fall for it—when the counterfeiting's good enough."

Stolman left the room; but was back almost in an instant, carrying a package in his hands.

"Good enough!" he ejaculated, echoing Stranway's words. He passed to the same side of the table that he had occupied before, opened the package, and held up to the light a sample twenty-dollar American gold certificate and a five-pound English note. "Good enough! Look at 'em!" he cried—and laughed. "This is counterfeit stuff that *is* counterfeit stuff! There hasn't been one in ten ever spotted. Chuck's getting them too cheap! You tell him that after this the price is going up."

Stranway's left hand was drumming a tattoo mechanically on the pile of hundred-dollar genuine notes that he had brought with him. He looked admiringly at the notes Stolman held up.

"Beauts!" said he eloquently.

Stolman nodded, put back the two notes, and opened the package wider, displaying neat piles of new counterfeit money similar to the specimens he had exhibited.

"I'll count what's here," he said. "They're the last of the lot, and——"

In a flash Stranway was on his feet, and, as his left hand whipped the genuine hundred-dollar bills into his pocket, the muzzle of his automatic peeped through the fingers of his right hand and held a line on Stolman's eyes.

"I wouldn't bother to count them!" he said in a low, grim voice. "Just hand them over!"

Stolman's face went white. He leaned heavily on the table, both hands on the package of counterfeit notes—and stared into Stranway's face. He swayed a little from one foot to the other.

"What's—what's the meaning of this?" he stammered hoarsely.

"Hand them over!" repeated Stranway curtly. "Your game's up—we've got you red-handed. I've half a dozen men outside the house."

For an instant more Stolman stood there staring wildly, jaw dropped, seeming to shuffle uneasily upon his feet—then there was a faint click, the lights went out, and there came a harsh, jeering laugh.

"Got me, have you—you fool!" sneered Stolman's voice out of the darkness. "Know now what those lights are for? A floor switch is a handy thing, ain't it—for the feet!"

For a second, it might have been two, in the transition from intense light Stranway could not see a thing; then the fireplace seemed to leap with sudden vigor into high, curling flames—and, as suddenly, the table was hurled against him, throwing him back toward the center of the room.

One shot Stranway fired at the ceiling as he regained his balance—the signal—and sprang on the instant for the fireplace. It was lighting up the room.

He could see again—only too well now! And with a sickening shock he understood. Stolman had thrown the counterfeit notes on the fire! It was the *evidence* that was blazing there on the logs! But if he could still get even *one* of the counterfeit notes it would be enough!

With a snarl and an oath, Stolman met his rush. They clenched, grappled. Stranway tried to throw the other from him and reach the fireplace, but he could not loosen Stolman's hold. They swayed, toppled, went to the floor, and rolled over and over.

A minute, two, three passed. The light in the fireplace died down to the flames from the logs alone. Both men were still struggling on the floor. And then, as there came the sound of racing footsteps from the hallway, Stolman wrenched himself suddenly free from Stranway, and, dashing to the fireplace, kicked quickly and frantically at the charred paper. A little flame sprang up again—and died down. And then, an instant later, as the door swung inward, the lights in the room blazed out—and Stolman was leaning calmly against the back of a chair, a sneer upon his face.

A moment the man stood there, evidently not quite able to see distinctly in the sudden glare of the lights he himself had switched on, then the sneer faded slowly from his lips, and his face became pasty white as he stared at Charlebois, who, with two men behind him, stood now in the open doorway.

"You!" Stolman mumbled. "It's a trick of some kind—you're——" He stopped with a little gasp, swept his hand across his eyes and seemed to pull himself together. "You!" he said again.

"Yes; I—Henri Raoul Charlebois!" The little old gentleman's voice, cold, contained, was deadly in its

menace, as he came forward into the room. "And this"—he laid his hand on Stranway's arm—"is Stranway—not Larson. But perhaps you have already discovered that fact. *I* found the real Larson, and got his story and his papers from him. And to-night I have got *you*—at last."

He took a step nearer Stolman, his face stern, set, implacable. Stolman gazed at him with a strange fascination, but without movement, save to wet his lips with his tongue.

"It is a long time ago, is it not?" Charlebois' voice dropped to a low monotone. "Many, many years ago! Do I need to recall that night to you? A cold, bitter night—a poor devil of a perishing, starving wretch brought into the barroom of a little western town by a big-hearted cowboy. They took up a collection for him—three dollars and seventy-five cents—do you remember? Every one contributed except one young fellow—you! When this poor devil went out into the night again, lighter hearted than he had been for many days, you followed him. *Do you remember?* You told him you were not well off yourself, not well enough off to give him the whole of the five-dollar bill that was all the money you had—that you wanted to help him, but had not liked to ask to have the bill changed before all the men in the room. You told him to give you the silver and he could keep the bill."

Charlebois paused. There was something in the rigid attitude of the little old gentleman, a quivering, passionate something that made Stranway lean suddenly, tensely forward.

"He thanked you, did he not?" Charlebois' low voice went on. "He thanked you, and with tears in his eyes asked God to bless you for your kindly, generous act—and then—and then for two long years with

prison stripes upon his back he paid bitterly for your 'generosity.' *The bill was counterfeit.* He was arrested in another town the next day and convicted for having attempted to pass that bill. He was friendless, a vagrant, a hard-looking character—he had no chance. Even his story helped to convict him—in the other town you were not known, not to be found. It was long ago, long, long ago. It was your night then—it is my night now. It is strange, is it not, that we should be dealing in counterfeits again?"

The sneer had gradually crept back to Stolman's face, and with it a brazen self-composure.

"If it is your night," he said mockingly, "you're welcome to it! I hope you like it! And talking about counterfeits, if you find any here you're welcome to *them,* too."

Charlebois turned quickly and looked at Stranway.

"What is it, my boy?" he asked sharply.

"He put out the lights with his foot—a floor switch," explained Stranway savagely. "I couldn't see for a moment. He flung the counterfeit notes into the fire, and——"

"Quite right—perhaps—if there *were* any counterfeit notes," jeered Stolman. "You are an imaginative and somewhat amusing pair of fools—one in his second childhood, the other not yet out of his first. Oh, well, don't cry over spilt milk! You may have better luck if you try again. Maybe you'll catch me then with the goods."

Slowly Charlebois turned once more toward Stolman, and his eyes played now with a curiously merciless composure over the other's face.

"There will never be an occasion to 'try' again," he said, with a grim smile. "An hour ago I should have been sorry that the notes were gone; now it is of

little consequence. What you will answer for to-night is not for counterfeiting—it is murder."

Stolman laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, no, I guess not; not with *you* standing there," he said meaningly. "But then, of course, you didn't know about that, did you? If I were to be held for any murder to-night it would be for yours."

"No," said Charlebois softly; "I am speaking of the murder of Sam Larson, the real Sam Larson!"

For the second time the sneer left Stolman's lips, and the white crept into his face.

"I—I don't know what you mean," he faltered.

"You tried to murder me to-night in Talimini's Café," said Charlebois sternly. "You see, I *do* know. But, instead of murdering me, the man you hired to do your cowardly, miserable work mistook Larson for me, and——"

"That's not true!" screamed Stolman suddenly. "You've no proof! You can't prove it!"

"It is God's justice," Charlebois went on, paying no heed to the interruption. "It has fallen heavily, strangely, has it not? That your tool should kill the very man who, before he died, placed in my hands at the hospital the information that enabled us to act to-night, is——"

"You've no proof!" The muscles of Stolman's lips were working in spasmodic twitches. "You've no proof! It's a frame-up—a dirty frame-up!"

With a slight movement of his head Charlebois motioned to the two men in the doorway—and a revolver gleamed in the light as he raised his hand quickly from the elbow.

"Don't put your hand in your pocket!" he commanded sharply. "Proof? Yes; you are entitled to that before you go. Your tool is known in gangland

as Magpie Low—ah, I see you recognize the name! He was captured by one of my men, and confessed within an hour of committing the crime. That is all." He turned to the two men, Rainier and Sewell. "Take him to Flint," he directed tersely, "and hand him over to the law with Low."

There was no fight, no resistance, no scuffle—it was a weak, flabby, nerveless thing that Rainier and Sewell half carried through the door.

For a moment after they had gone Charlebois stood motionless, then he laid his hand on Stranway's arm.

"An utter scoundrel," he said soberly. "A curse upon society—a man, I think, who for the first time has aroused no single appeal to my sympathy or pity."

Stranway was staring at the fireplace, his brows knitted.

"He might have been lying about that being all the counterfeit notes," he said suddenly. "At any rate, it would be worth while to look through the house."

A whimsical smile crept to the little old gentleman's lips, and he shook his head as he walked slowly toward the door.

"That, my boy," he said quietly, "is for the police to do—my debt is paid."

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST DAY OF GRACE

CONVICTED MURDERER OF CRIME THAT STIRRED COUNTRY BEGINS HIS LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS ON EARTH

IT was flung across the front page of the morning edition in two-inch caps. It was yellow, of course, morbidly, vulgarly yellow—but it was there. Columns of details, both authentic and spurious, garnished with a jungle of lurid adjectives followed; there was a diagrammatic sketch showing the relative position of the condemned man's cell in "murderers' row" and the death chamber with the fatal chair; then a sensational résumé of the crime and trial—the whole ending with the ensuing paragraph:

"At the time of the trial it will be remembered that public opinion was violently divided as to the guilt or innocence of the accused; the majority perhaps inclining favorably toward the prisoner. Since then the tide of public opinion has set strongly, and apparently with ample justification, against him. It will be recalled that the condemned was a relatively poor man, a bricklayer; and, also, that only a small part—some $5,000—of the stolen $200,000 was found in his possession. Yet in the two years that have elapsed since his trial at which the most brilliant criminal lawyers in the country defended him, it has been estimated that his

legal expenses, including the original trial and the numerous appeals he has taken and finally carried to the highest court of the country, have cost him not less than $125,000. Where did he get this money? That question, a damning one, has remained unanswered, though on everybody's lips. It is believed to have played a large part in Governor Henderson's final refusal to interfere in the last act of the tragedy when, to-morrow morning, the law will take its course."

Stranway, summoned peremptorily from the West by wire, had reached New York but barely half an hour before; he had bought the paper in the Pennsylvania station on leaving the train, and now, as the taxi drew up at the curb at the corner of Ninth Street and Sixth Avenue, he frowned as he folded the sheets, tucked them in his pocket, descended from the cab and dismissed the chauffeur—modest, unobtrusive little Dominic Court was never unduly to be invaded by so ostentatious a vehicle as a taxi-cab.

Carrying his bag, Stranway started briskly along Sixth Avenue. His mind was full of the account he had just read; not from a morbid appetite for the ultra-sensational, but because the name of the condemned man was, he knew, upon the pages of the Red Ledger. But he knew no more than that; nothing as to the history or the details of the case. There were too many entries on the pages of the Red Ledger, too many cases actually in process of settlement almost everywhere throughout the civilized world for him to know them all in detail—as witness the last month during which, though he had been travelling constantly on what Charlebois had termed a tour of inspection, he, Stranway, had been able to come into direct personal contact with but a very small propor-

tion of the work being done, even in the United States alone, by those "outside" members of the organization who, acting upon the little old gentleman's orders and instructions, were engaged in balancing the Red Ledger's strange accounts.

But he remembered the name in the present instance—Marlin; Wilfred Marlin—and he could not help wondering, as he turned into the passageway that led from Sixth Avenue to the secluded little courtyard, if this was the cause of his hurried summons from the West.

Traversing the passageway, Stranway emerged on quaint old Dominic Court with its row of four small wooden houses, and was instantly admitted at the door of No. 1.

A moment later, passing through the interior connecting doors of the four houses, Stranway reached the glass-panelled door that opened on the Red Room in No. 2½, and on the other side of which hung the red-silken portière—and here instinctively he paused. It was here, on that afternoon when he had first come to Dominic Court, that he had first seen the Orchid. And now almost eagerly he looked around him, as though with some vague hope, swiftly formed, that she might somehow, miraculously, impossibly, appear suddenly before him. Still another month had gone now since he had seen her; a month during which she had been more than ever—if that were possible! —in his thoughts. She wasn't here, of course! There would be no one but Henri Raoul Charlebois on the other side of the portière in the Red Room. He knew that quite well. But suddenly he was intensely glad that he was back, glad that the trip was over, for here in New York was always the expectancy—no; more than that!—the certainty of

seeing her again, if only at odd moments and under infernally tantalizing circumstances. Perhaps, in view of the fact that he had been away for so long, Charlebois might be a little more communicative about her this time. No! He shook his head. No use in that! The little old gentleman would merely smile, half teasingly, half tolerantly—and that would be the end of it.

Stranway shrugged his shoulders, thereby inadequately expressing his feelings—and knocked on the glass-panelled door. Charlebois' voice answered him. Stranway opened the door, pushed aside the red-silken portière and stepped forward into the room.

The little old gentleman, red skull-cap surmounting his fringe of silvery hair, the tassel bobbing from the cap, rose from the old mahogany desk, and held out both hands to Stranway.

"Ah, my boy," he said affectionately, "you are back." He patted Stranway's shoulders caressingly. "You have lost no time."

"I received the wire last night—I judged it was urgent," Stranway answered simply, as he smiled a response to the other's greeting.

Charlebois' fine old face set instantly in more serious lines, and a grave, sober note crept into his voice.

"Yes, my boy," he said, "it is urgent—very urgent. A man's life hangs on what we may be able to accomplish to-day."

"Ah!" said Stranway quickly. "It *is* Marlin then?"

"It is Marlin," Charlebois answered, nodding his head slowly. "Marlin—and another. But you, my boy"—he seated himself again at the desk—"you have had a long journey, are you——"

Stranway laughed easily, as he, too, sat down.

"I'm ready for anything," he said.

"That is good!" exclaimed Charlebois heartily. "Excellent—for my plans very largely depend upon you this morning! And as we have very little time, and as there is a great deal that you must first know in order to work intelligently, we will do well to postpone the report of your trip until to-night, and devote ourselves without preliminaries to the matter in hand."

He opened the Red Ledger, which lay on the desk before him.

"It is a strange case," he said abruptly. "It has baffled me for two years. I have watched it anxiously, striven to solve it—and watched the sand in the hour-glass running out. And to-day with the sand almost gone, when to-morrow's dawn will see it all exhausted and Marlin will pay the forfeit with his life, there is but a single ray of hope left; a hope pregnant with grave doubt and grave anxiety, the anxiety with which the chemist at the end of his long research watches the final experiment that means success or failure—that means to us to-day the life or death of a fellow creature."

Charlebois paused, and his steel-blue eyes softened for an instant as they played over the strong, clean-cut face, and the broad-shouldered, athletic frame of the younger man.

Stranway, all attention now, his head a little forward, leaned on the arm of his chair.

"I do not know of any crime of recent years," said Charlebois, almost musingly, "that at the time it was committed caused such wide-spread interest and, indeed, such intense partisanship, as this one of which Wilfred Marlin was convicted; and this partisanship was due, no doubt, to the intangible air of mystery that surrounded the crime, in spite of the fact that the jury on their first ballot and within ten minutes after

they retired from the courtroom found the prisoner guilty. Briefly, the facts are these. During the night of the eighteenth of October, two years ago, the Conway National Bank at Parker's Landing was—but do you know the town, my boy?"

"Yes, I think I do." Stranway nodded. "About twenty miles up the Hudson on the East shore, isn't it? I've motored by it several times."

The little old gentleman bobbed his head.

"That is well," he said, "for your knowledge of the road will likely be very useful to you before many hours are past. But to resume: The Conway National Bank was robbed of the sum of one hundred and eighty-nine thousand dollars in cash, which——"

"That's a good deal for a small country bank to be carrying in its vaults, isn't it?" interrupted Stranway quietly.

"Yes," agreed Charlebois; "but it was just one hundred and fifty thousand more than was usually carried. The extra amount was to take care of the redemption of an issue of County bonds maturing the next day. There was no immediate clue to the thief. The vault was wrecked with nitro-glycerine, and by the time the townspeople, awakened by the explosion, had hurried to the scene half-dressed, the thief and the funds had disappeared. The town was in a furor, but the excitement was to reach a still greater height. The next night Doctor Hebron H. Kearn was murdered in his consulting room."

"Yes," said Stranway, "I remember that; but nothing of the details apart from the garbled account in this morning's paper."

"It is a strange case," said Charlebois musingly again, as, leaning his elbows on the pages of the Red Ledger, he cupped his chin in his hands. "A strange,

strange case! Doctor Kearn was a young man of not more than thirty. He had been practising in Parker's Landing then for some three years. He lived alone with an elderly housekeeper. If he had any relatives, they must have been distant ones for they do not appear in the case; at any rate, he was known to be an orphan. The house he lived in was a small wooden-frame affair on a side street, and to this he had had a one-story addition built on, consisting of two rooms which he used as reception and consulting rooms for his patients—these had their own entrance from the street. The body was discovered on the floor of the rear room, the consulting room—but not until the next noon, when Mrs. MacPherson, the housekeeper, found him."

"That's rather queer!" commented Stranway. "She must have known the first thing in the morning that he hadn't slept in the house that night."

"No," Charlebois answered; "it was natural enough. She thought nothing of it, as the doctor was frequently called on cases that kept him out all night. The body had been atrociously mutilated about the face to such an extent that it was scarcely recognizable. It was battered and gashed as though some one had beaten at it in a frenzy of ungovernable passion. Indeed, the question of identity might easily have been in dispute had it not been for the strong presumptive evidence furnished by the surroundings themselves, the clothes, belongings, and, principally, a lance wound, bandaged, on the left wrist of the body—an accident Doctor Kearn was known to have suffered several days before.

"We come now to the evidence. The blows had evidently been struck with a bricklayer's hammer. I need hardly describe what that is to you—a short-

handled instrument readily carried in the overalls' pocket; its head like an ordinary hammer, except that the curved section, instead of being divided into prongs, is in one piece and very much broader and longer, and is used for cutting and splitting the bricks. This, blood-stained, was found beneath the doctor's desk, and was readily identified. It belonged to Wilfred Marlin who, as the papers will have reminded you, was a bricklayer. Mrs. MacPherson swore that, as she was preparing to retire, she saw and recognized Marlin, whom she had known all her life, standing under the street lamp before the house, and afterward saw him go to the door of the doctor's office entrance and ring the bell. She swore that the doctor himself admitted Marlin, and that shortly afterward she heard the sound of angry voices as though a violent quarrel were in progress. She listened for some ten minutes, until a passer-by, evidently attracted by the quarrel, went up to the door and rang the bell. The door was opened, the passer-by, apparently reassured, went away again, and after that there was silence. Mrs. MacPherson then retired. The person whom she described as having rung the bell, corroborated her testimony in court, adding that he saw Marlin in his overalls standing in the reception room.

"But the most damning evidence was yet to come. Doctor Kearn was a man who kept a diary—a habit which most people lose after a certain age, but which clings to some through life. It was an ordinary diary filled with short personal observations and notes of daily happenings. Under the date of the day following the bank robbery, was the entry: 'The bank here was looted last night. What shall I do? God knows I have reason enough to be morally certain that it was a man named Marlin—and yet, if after all, I am

wrong, and should tell what I know, I would be ruining an innocent man's life. What shall I do?'

"Marlin was immediately arrested, his house was searched, and five one-thousand-dollar bills, which from their denomination furnished prima facie evidence that they were part of the bank's stolen funds, were found concealed in an old cigar box on a shelf in his woodshed. No trace was ever discovered of any portion of the remainder of the money that had been taken from the vaults, and——"

"And in the face of this," Stranway ejaculated impulsively, "some people, you yourself, perhaps, believed him to be——"

"One point more," Charlebois interposed quietly, "and we are through with the case as presented by the prosecution. Marlin, it was established by incontrovertible evidence, was a man of hot-headed, violent and passionate disposition—quick to quarrel, and in a quarrel was the stamp of man who would lose control over himself and might, in rage, go to any length."

"Yes," said Stranway again; "and in the face of this how could any one believe him innocent? And yet they did, according to the papers, and as you yourself have said."

It was a moment before Charlebois answered.

"I do not know why, my boy," he said at last. "That is really one of the strangest features connected with the case. I do not know. Perhaps it was the man's straightforward attitude, perhaps it was the record of a clean life before, perhaps it was his strange story that held in it everything but the single shred of evidence on which his lawyers could build a defense, perhaps it was his helplessness—perhaps it was all these combined."

"But you," Stranway probed, "do you believe him to be innocent?"

"Yes," said the little old gentleman slowly. "Yes; I believe he is innocent. At times I must confess that logic and reason have given rise to serious doubts; but I have believed in him for the reasons that I have mentioned—and for another. Marlin admitted that he had been in the doctor's reception room that night as the witnesses had testified, and he admitted that they had had hot words together; but he swore that there had been no fight, that he had neither touched nor struck the doctor, and that he had not had his hammer with him, that he had left it in the woodshed with the rest of his tools. Asked why he had not removed his overalls, he said that his supper was ready for him when he returned from work that evening, and he had not taken them off as he had some jobs to do around the house afterward. He admitted that it was his habit to carry the hammer with the handle stuck in the side leg-pocket of his overalls, but he positively maintained that he did not have it with him when he went to Doctor Kearn's. You will see, however, that his assertion, in the eyes of the jury, counted for but very little."

Charlebois rose abruptly from his chair, clasped his hands at the back of his red velvet smoking jacket and began to pace up and down the room.

Intently, Stranway's eyes followed the other. What was coming? Keen-brained, tenacious, knowing no obstacles, stern, implacable, inexorable where occasion required, tender-hearted as a woman, chivalrous, kindly, gentle where his wondrous depth of sympathy was touched, the little old gentleman always fascinated him, commanding daily an increased respect that was ever drawing the bond of affection between them tighter.

Charlebois stopped before Stranway's chair suddenly.

"What do you make of this?" he demanded incisively. "Marlin said he went to Doctor Kearn's that night, waiting however until an hour when all the patients would have gone, to accuse the doctor of having robbed the bank and to force the other to return the money."

"What do I make out of it?" responded Stranway dryly. "Well, I should say he would have done better to have kept his mouth closed. To accuse a dead man who had acted so decently in respect of his own suspicions doesn't show Marlin up any too well! Doctor Kearn, from the records in his diary, must have been possessed of a high moral sense of responsibility——"

"Then how about Marlin in the same respect?" inquired Charlebois quickly. "Marlin said he had been out late at a friend's house on the night of the robbery, and when near the bank heard the explosion and started to run toward it. Just as he got there he saw Doctor Kearn running from the rear of the bank with a satchel in his hand. All the next day Marlin said he did not know what to do, or what move to make. You see, like the doctor in his statement, he felt he might be wrong. And then finally he decided to have it out with the doctor himself."

Stranway shook his head.

"It's too thin," he said decisively. "Why—but, good heavens, what's the use! It's open and shut! Part of the money in his possession—the hammer that killed the doctor—everything. Why, even accepting his own statement for a moment, it only makes out a still blacker case against him. Instead of killing the doctor to keep the doctor from exposing him, it

could be argued that he killed Kearn to get the money he said Kearn had stolen from the bank. What possible reason, unless he is a fool, could he have for making such a statement?"

"The prosecution was sarcastically emphatic on that point," said Charlebois.

"I should imagine it would be," returned Stranway. "That's it exactly! What possible reason could he have for saying such a thing?"

"None," said Charlebois simply. "None—unless it were the *truth.* And this is my other reason for believing in him—his very ingenuousness."

"Truth!" exclaimed Stranway. "But it is impossible! They could not both be telling the truth, and——"

"Why not?" interrupted Charlebois gently. "If Marlin saw Doctor Kearn running near the bank at the time of the robbery and jumped to the conclusion that Doctor Kearn was involved in it, is it not quite as logical, and even more so, that Doctor Kearn saw Marlin and formed the same conclusion in reference to Marlin that Marlin entertained toward him—and both be honest in their beliefs?"

"But the satchel, then, that Marlin claims he saw Doctor Kearn carrying?" said Stranway quickly.

"The doctor's medical handbag," supplied Charlebois. "Why not?"

Stranway jerked himself forward in his chair and stared at Charlebois.

"Then what does it mean?" he burst out. "Each accused the other, some of the money is found in Marlin's possession, the doctor is murdered and the straightest kind of evidence points to Marlin as the murderer. If both were innocent of the robbery, what, in God's name, does it mean?"

"Did I not tell you," said Charlebois softly, "that it was a strange, strange case? As you have said, Marlin's statement did him perhaps more harm than good at the trial, and the evidence against him was so conclusive that his lawyers were obliged to grasp, like drowning men at straws, at the only fighting point that was left open to them. It developed at the autopsy that the deceased had a heart affection. The defense tried to establish the fact that the blows in themselves would not have caused death had it not been for this. They put medical witnesses on the stand to support their point, and, of course, the prosecution put on an equal number of men equally high in their profession to rebut it—and that, the last and, indeed, the only line of defense, fell through and collapsed. After that, on every technicality that could be raised the case has been carried from court to court in appeal until finally it reached the governor, who but yesterday refused to interfere. That is the situation we are facing at this moment."

Stranway drew the newspaper from his pocket, unfolded it, found the last paragraph of the "story" and handed it to the little old gentleman.

"And according to that," he said, "the trial and appeals have cost a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, which the paper hints pretty broadly accounts for a large share of the missing money, and also claims that this theory has weighed heavily against Marlin in the petition for clemency presented to the governor."

Charlebois waved the paper away as he seated himself again at the desk.

"I have read it," he said. "It is malicious. It had neither weight nor significance with the executive head of this state—I was in conference with Governor

Henderson yesterday. As for the amount"—Charlebois smiled whimsically and spread out his hands—"it is, strange to say, since it appears in that sheet, not exaggerated. Listen, my boy. It was during those years of my destitution, that period of my life during which all the accounts in the Red Ledger originated, that, in a little town not far from here, I knocked one night at the door of a young couple, humble people, who had just been married. I was an utter stranger to them. I was without a penny, very hungry, and very despondent. The wife, she was a black-haired, sparkling-eyed, happy girl then, gave me food and listened to my story, and then with ready sympathy talked to me until her happy courage revived my own; while the husband, a rough, good-hearted man, stood by and listened, nodding his head approvingly as she spoke. When I went away that night, the husband walked with me to the door, clapped me encouragingly on the shoulder and slipped a fifty-cent piece into my hand. To-day, in that same town, the black-haired, happy girl is a gray-haired, broken-hearted, sorrowful woman bending beneath a load of bitter agony too great to bear; to-day, that husband waits the call of death in a murderer's cell; and I—the one with whom they shared their happiness and their home that night—am here." There was a quiver in Charlebois' rich, full tones, and his eyes, suddenly dimmed, dropped to the pages of the Red Ledger before him. "I, of course, was the one who spent that money which is now being held against him as further evidence of his guilt."

"I might have known!" said Stranway in a low voice. "Yes, I understand."

"The record of it is here"—Charlebois spoke after an instant's silence, and his hand swept the page with

a quick, gliding motion—"but the account, in spite of all my efforts, is still unbalanced, and the time now is very short—it is the last day of grace."

"You spoke," said Stranway, "of a hope that still remains, which——"

"I pray God it may not be ill-founded," the little old gentleman broke in earnestly. "I come to that now; and I must dismiss it in as few words as possible for there is work, as I have said, for you to do, work that I do not wish to intrust to any one else, since our final plans, under existing conditions, will have to be made so much upon the spur of the moment that it may even devolve upon you to make entirely new plans of your own at the last instant—that is why I have brought you back, my boy. But to the point: There is one thing I have not mentioned in connection with the trial. I can hardly call it evidence, for while it was brought out at the trial it was given no prominence whatever. It was this. Doctor Kearn's evening consultation hours were from seven until eight—the last patient left, and this was established, at half-past eight. At nine o'clock, a townsman, passing the doctor's house, saw a man in a checked suit, who, he was positive, was a stranger in the town, go up to the doctor's door, ring the bell and enter the reception room. No trace of this stranger could be discovered afterward."

"But that was a full hour *before* Marlin went to the doctor's," objected Stranway. "The doctor was alive and well then; and, according to Marlin himself, who said the doctor was alone when he got there, the stranger, whoever he was, must have gone. I can't see that it has any bearing whatever on the case. The stranger might easily have been, say, a travelling man, who came in by trolley or train, and, perhaps, not

feeling well, consulted the first doctor whose sign he came across."

"Yes," said Charlebois, and the tassel of his skull-cap bobbed in acquiescence with the motion of his head. "Precisely so. That was exactly the attitude toward it at the trial—it was, and naturally so, I must confess, treated as extraneous. Yet for two years my search for that stranger in the checked suit has never faltered; day and night in all that time the organization has been at work, and with every resource at my command I have tried to find him."

"Tried to find him!" echoed Stranway in genuine astonishment. "Why? Have you any reason to believe that he is at the bottom of it?"

Charlebois smiled a little wanly.

"Only a hope," he admitted; "a hope arrived at solely by the process of elimination. There was absolutely no other clue, no other effort that could be made on Marlin's behalf. It was that—or nothing. That—or remain passive; for I felt that the appeals in the long run would be fruitless."

"And this man in the checked suit," Stranway asked excitedly, "have you found him?"

"Yes," said Charlebois; "we have found him. I will not go into the details of that two years' search; of clues picked up, lost, recovered, and lost again—we have neither the time, nor is it vital to what is before us. We found him finally a month ago in Paris."

"Ah!" exclaimed Stranway eagerly. "And what does he say?"

"That," said Charlebois, "is exactly what we are about to make an effort to find out." The little old gentleman raised his hand as Stranway was about to speak. "Just a moment, my boy, I know what you are

going to say; but if he *is* the guilty man, or has guilty knowledge of the crime, it would have been fatal to put him in any way upon his guard while abroad. He had to be here where we could put him to the test. We have succeeded, but with desperately little time to spare, in luring him into a voyage across the ocean; it is not so simple, however, if he is in any way guilty, to induce him to make the trip of twenty miles from New York to Parker's Landing—which is the task I have reserved for you. He is to arrive this morning from Cherbourg. The vessel is docking now, and as soon as the passengers are through the customs, I shall have news of where you will find him."

"But"—there was disappointment in Stranway's tones—"have you nothing more to go on than that? Nothing to connect him in any way with the crime?"

"No," said the little old gentleman gravely. "I have nothing more than that, except that his life in Paris while under our observation was decidedly pernicious. He may be as innocent of any connection with the crime as you or I."

Stranway shook his head.

"I am afraid it is a very slender hope," he said.

"I believe in Marlin's innocence," Charlebois responded quietly. "I believe intuitively it will be established—and there is hope from no other source than this."

"Yes; I see," Stranway responded seriously. "And now what am I to do?"

"This for the moment," Charlebois answered. "You will probably have to act quickly when the moment arrives; and, that there may be no loss of time, go to the garage at once, take the new touring car that was delivered to us this morning, drive it yourself

to the corner of the avenue, and wait there by the Jefferson Night Court. By that time, I should have heard from the dock, and will send you such instructions as I may then have to give you. But principally, you are to get this man—his name is Peter Rolver—to Parker's Landing as soon as possible. You may have trouble, but——"

"I will get him there," said Stranway grimly, as he rose from his chair.

Charlebois smiled soberly.

"I have no doubt of that," he said. "Go then, my boy. Go at once."

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH A TRAP IS BAITED

TWENTY minutes later, Stranway, at the wheel of a high-powered touring car of the latest and most expensive make, drew up beside the curb in front of the police court on Sixth Avenue He looked at his watch as he stopped the car. It was eleven thirty-five. From where he sat he could watch the entrance to Dominic Court, a block and a half away.

A strange case, Charlebois had said. It unquestionably was! Stranway's brows furrowed, as, waiting, he settled back in his seat. Somehow, he could not quite take the work before him as seriously as usual—the chance of this man Rolver being implicated in the crime seemed too remote, too chimerical, too visionary. But how like Charlebois it was that, on the credit or the debit side, leaving no single stone unturned, sparing neither labor, time nor money, he might repay—sternly, implacably, or with great-hearted, infinite, kindly, human love—those curious accounts he had inscribed in the long-ago on the pages of the Red Ledger!

Stranway lighted a cigarette, and, as he smoked, the picture Charlebois had drawn of Marlin and Marlin's wife, and with it the gentle, earnest face of the little old gentleman himself, full of calm trust and faith, rose before his eyes; and a wave of pity for the two unfortunates, and sympathy for the man who was at once his chief and friend, swept over him. There

seemed no other thing to expect, viewed logically and rationally, but failure.

A half hour passed, another quarter. No message yet had come from Charlebois. It was already twelve-twenty. Stranway slipped his watch back into his pocket after one of many consultations, and leaned suddenly forward. Ah! Yes! Some one at last was emerging from the passageway leading from Dominic Court. The man came briskly down the avenue, stopped beside the car, handed Stranway an envelope and passed on.

Stranway tore it open and read the note he found therein. Its sentences were crisp and terse almost to the point of being enigmatical:

"R at the Brabant-Lorraine. At luncheon now. Hurry. Leave car side entrance. Join him at same table. Pretend slight but not offensive intoxication. Assume character of garrulous automobile enthusiast. Take cue from assistance you will receive. Rainier in lobby. Second house up, right-hand side, first street past bank at Parker's Landing. C."

Once more Stranway read the note carefully, then he tore it into little shreds, dropped them into his pocket—and the car leaped forward.

It was fifteen minutes later when Stranway drew up at the side entrance of the big hotel, and, leaving the car at the curb, walked around the corner to the main entrance on Fifth Avenue and entered the lobby of the Brabant-Lorraine.

A man rose from a lounging chair and sauntered nonchalantly past him—it was Rainier.

Stranway followed. Rainier led the way along the wide corridor that gave off the lobby, stopped before

the café door, and nodded almost imperceptibly to the head waiter, who was standing at the threshold.

"One?" inquired the head waiter politely of Stranway. "Yes, sir; this way, sir."

Rainier had taken out his cigarette case and was profoundly occupied in tapping one end of a cigarette against his thumb nail.

"Head waiter is fixed," he said in an undertone, but without turning his head, as Stranway stepped past him. "He'll jolly Rolver into letting you occupy the same table."

The room, a large one, was well filled; all the tables, so far as Stranway could judge from a cursory survey, being occupied—save for one or two here and there which, from their up-tilted chairs, had evidently been reserved. One of these, Stranway noticed, was directly behind him as he halted before a table already occupied by one man, while the head waiter, bowing and explaining in deferential tones that the hotel was very crowded at luncheon that day, asked its occupant if he would be gracious enough to share his table with another gentleman. The reply was a grunt of compliance, and Stranway, with the slightest indication of a lurch, settled into the chair that the waiter pulled out for him.

Stranway bowed with exaggerated dignity to the man opposite whom he found himself—and clumsily dropped on the floor the pencil that the waiter handed him with an order blank. He apologized profusely to the waiter and to his table companion, who, obviously must be Rolver. Rolver responded with a curt nod, and a smile that was more a contemptuous sneer of understanding.

"I've been motoring all morning, you know," said Stranway fatuously. "Frightfully hard on the wrist, you know, those big cars. Here, waiter, you write it down." Stranway gave an order which was both

un-epicurean and careless, waved the waiter away, and addressed himself again to Rolver. "I've a peach of a car," he confided blithely to the other. "Just got delivery this morning. Been trying her out, you know. Go in much for the sport?"

Rolver's answer was an uncompromising shrug of the shoulders—and Stranway beamed on him with delighted amiability, as though quite oblivious of the fact that any warmth was lacking in the other's reception of his advances.

But while he smiled at Rolver, he studied the man—and the more he studied the other, the less he liked him. Rolver, he discovered, was of medium height, rather thick-set, and, Stranway judged, somewhere between thirty and thirty-five years of age. His heavy black beard and mustache were almost too fastidiously trimmed; his eyes were gray, small and restless, and they were too nearly flush with the retreating forehead to please Stranway. The whole appearance of the man was blasé and annoyingly supercilious.

Blissfully unconscious, to all appearances, of rebuff, Stranway attacked his consommé and between mouthfuls expatiated enthusiastically on the merits of his car. By the time he had reached his meat course, Rolver was engaged with a demi-tasse and a cigar—and Rolver had thawed out a little. That is to say, the contemptuous smile of understanding had changed to a contemptuous smile of amusement, and he had interpolated a remark here and there with the very evident purpose of discovering how great was the inanity of which Stranway was capable.

"What kind of a car did you say yours was?" he inquired at this juncture.

Stranway promptly laid down his fork.

"Crouthier-Lars," said he brightly, with his mouth

full. "Runs like a cat—not a sound! And say, she's a whizzer; eight-cylinder—I'll take you for spin presently that'll open your eyes. Most frightfully glad to!"

To this Rolver made no return. The sound of scraping chairs behind Stranway told him that the empty table was now being occupied. Rolver's eyes were fixed in that direction, and he became suddenly engaged in twirling the ends of his mustache to a rakishly fetching angle.

"Bet you a hundred to fifty that Wilfred Marlin doesn't go to the electric chair to-morrow, or any other time"—a man's voice, half laughing, half earnest, came suddenly from the table just occupied.

Not a muscle of Stranway's face moved. Unostentatiously watching Rolver, he thought the man's fingers for an instant ceased their operations on the mustache ends, but, if so, the pause was very slight indeed. And then, self-contained as Stranway was, for an instant he almost lost his own control, as the sound of a woman's voice reached him—a voice that he would have known amongst thousands, that thrilled him and quickened the beat of his pulse.

It was the Orchid.

She was speaking; her voice playfully chiding, yet still with a serious note in it:

"Now, Jimmy, that's not sportsmanlike! And it's not a very nice subject for a bet, either! You are taking Mr. Kemp at a disadvantage. Mr. Kemp"—she evidently turned to another companion—"Jimmy has what I think you call 'inside information,' and that isn't fair; though I'll do him the justice to say that I know he wouldn't let you put up the money. Anyway, I'm going to tell on him. Jimmy's uncle, you know, is a commissioner of police. Well, it seems that the police have discovered the real author of the

crime for which this poor bricklayer Marlin was convicted. They found the man in Paris a month ago. Since then he has been under constant surveillance. They lured him then on some pretext into coming back to New York. He arrived this morning from Cherbourg, and is probably under arrest by now. If he isn't, it is because the police are giving him a little more rope. I'm not giving away any professional secrets because he is sure to be arrested this afternoon anyhow, and the evening papers will be full of it. The case created quite a stir, you know."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated a deep bass voice, presumably that of Mr. Kemp. "You don't say!"

Madly Stranway was fighting now for self-possession. The blood was pounding at his temples, as, mingling with the fierce exultant thrill that the sound of the Orchid's voice had brought him, there rushed upon him a sense of abysmal irony. For more than a month now, day and night, he had been hoping, longing for his next meeting with her, and now she was here, within a few feet of him—only to be more inaccessible than ever she had been before! He dared not even glance around. The game was on, and a single false move on his part now would ruin it. He was conscious that Rolver's eyes were fastened on him sharply, intently, with a look in them that had not been there before—a look that was at once speculative and in which lurked a suspicious interest. And there was something else, too, in Rolver's eyes, and a sudden new thrill of exultation, quite independent of that caused by the Orchid's presence, swept over him. *Charlebois had been right!* Guilt and a hunted look were in Rolver's eyes, and the man's face was almost gray.

Stranway set down his knife and fork and smiled brightly at the other again.

"You bet she's a whizzer!" he reiterated, as though hopelessly obsessed with but one idea. "Climb the side of a house, you know, 'pon my honor, at eighty miles an hour!"

He reached for the water carafe, caught his fork in his sleeve and sent it flying to the floor. With a confused and crestfallen air, he stooped to pick it up —and glanced toward the other table. The Orchid sat between Hume and Laidley, two of the organization's men. Not one of the three looked in his direction, or paid the slightest attention to him.

When he straightened up, a bellboy, threading his way between the numerous tables, had just reached Rolver's side. Stranway was apparently engrossed in endeavoring to attract the attention of a waiter in an effort to procure a clean fork.

"Mr. Peter Rolver, sir?" inquired the boy.

"Yes," said Rolver.

"Gentleman to see you, sir—out in the lobby. He'd like to see you at once, sir."

"Well, who is he?" demanded Rolver. "Where's his card?"

"He didn't send one, sir. He's an officer—a police lieutenant, sir."

Out of the corner of his eye Stranway caught the quick twitch of the other's lips, the sudden clenching of the hand on the table edge; but the man's voice was steady enough as he answered:

"All right. Tell him I'll be there in a moment—as soon as I can settle my check."

Stranway from a seemingly fruitless effort to catch a waiter's eye, swung around in his seat to face Rolver again.

"Beastly service in this place," he grumbled. "Report to the manager, see if I don't!"

Rolver leaned over the table toward him.

"Where's that car of yours?" he asked quickly.

"H'm?" inquired Stranway, not over-intelligently.

"The car—where's your car?"

Stranway jerked his head in the direction of the side entrance.

"Out there," he said. "Why?"

"Because," said Rolver hurriedly, "I'll take you up on that invitation for a spin, if you meant what you said."

Stranway opened his eyes wide and stared at the other with an injured air.

"'Course I meant it," he declared.

"Good!" responded Rolver. "I thought you did—but I'll have to go at once."

"All right," agreed Stranway, grabbing at the fork he had been so fastidious about a moment ago. "I'll finish up my lunch in a——"

"Now!" interrupted Rolver. "I've just received some—some important news. It's a matter of life and death. You're sport enough, aren't you, to let a lunch go to help a fellow out of a hole?"

Stranway promptly pushed back his chair.

"You bet!" said he effusively.

Rolver beckoned to the waiter.

"I'll settle the checks," he said quickly. "Out there at the side door, you said, didn't you? There isn't a moment to lose."

From the table behind Stranway came the sound of a knife or fork drumming what was apparently a nervous, if impolite, tattoo upon the edge of a plate. It ended as Rolver pushed a bill into the waiter's hand and stood up—but Stranway had read the code: "Will chase you to Parker's Landing."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN IN THE CHECKED SUIT

THE Orchid's eyes were on her plate, and she did not look up as Rolver, catching Stranway's arm, started hastily for the side door—but Stranway, passing her table, did not go without his reward. The same faint tinge of color, that once before had set his heart to beating wildly, was mounting to her cheeks. It was not for Hume; it was not for Laidley. And somehow this "next" meeting, though neither word nor look had passed between them, a more "impossible" meeting than they had ever had before, left him, not with disappointment, but with an uplift upon him, a singing in his heart, and a daring hope that he had not been altogether out of her thoughts merely because a month had come and gone since they had last seen each other.

He was scarcely conscious he had reached his car and that Rolver had jumped into the front seat beside him—but the next instant, as the car sped forward, he was brought rudely and sharply back to a very acute realization of his immediate surroundings and the rôle he was playing. In the vision-mirror he saw a big, red car dash around the corner behind him—a car that held three men, one of whom was in the uniform of a police officer. And Rolver had seen that police uniform too!

Rolver was staring back over his shoulder, and now he touched Stranway on the arm.

"You said this was a fast car—go faster!" he directed curtly.

"Faster?" repeated Stranway innocently. "I can't, you know—not here, not in the city. Speed ordinance, and all that, you know!"

"Look behind you!"

Stranway obeyed.

"Do you see that red car?" inquired Rolver shortly.

"Sure!" said Stranway. "She's a Peterson 'Sixty,' last year's model, valve-in-the-head motor, you know, and——"

"And do you see *this?*" A revolver had leapt suddenly into Rolver's hand.

"Oh, I say, you know!" protested Stranway, edging away with well-simulated alarm to the side of his seat. "What's the bally joke?"

"There is no joke," said Rolver in a hard voice. "That car is chasing us. If she catches us this will be the last car you'll ever drive, that's all—understand?"

"She—she won't catch us," stammered Stranway, "unless we get held up by a traffic block, and"—brightening up and smiling a hesitant, conciliatory smile at Rolver—"once in the country, we can run away from her, you know, 'pon my honor, we can."

"If you know what's good for your health, then," snapped Rolver, "you'll get into the country quicker than you ever did in your life before."

"Oh, I say, you know," said Stranway earnestly, "I will—really. 'Pon my honor, I will, if you'll only put that beastly thing away. It—it might go off over a jolt, you know."

"It's liable to go off before that," Rolver gritted between his teeth. "She's creeping up on us now."

For three-quarters of an hour, now gaining, now

losing, but never with more than half a block separating them, the chase continued while they worked out of Manhattan and before they finally struck the river road on the east bank of the Hudson. And so far Stranway's task had been a simple one—he had only to make the best speed he could; it was the task of the car behind, and a difficult one, to maintain the semblance of a chase that should be at once determined and unsuccessful. It had been clever work. Not once had the red car been far enough in the rear to give Rolver a chance—by making Stranway slow down—of jumping from the car, dodging out of sight, and so making his escape.

And now the clear sweep of the road lay before them with Parker's Landing some fifteen miles ahead. Behind, still dogging them like a remorseless bloodhound on the trail, followed the red car.

Rolver rammed the revolver muzzle suddenly into Stranway's ribs.

"We're clear now!" he said hoarsely. "Speed her up, speed her up, do you hear? And God help you, if you don't get away!"

Stranway, bending over the wheel, did not answer, except to open his mouth in a sort of frightened gasp and nod his head wildly, as he let the car out. There was something of sardonic irony in this journey of Rolver's to Parker's Landing at the insistent point of Rolver's own revolver held in Rolver's own hand —and to himself Stranway chuckled grimly.

The car was rocking like a storm-tossed liner in an angry sea. Past them flew fences, telegraph poles and dwellings, like the quick-run film of a cinematograph. Teams were pulled hastily to the side of the road, and for a flashing instant they would catch a glimpse of a horse reared on his hind legs—and

then a curve would be taken in a breathless sweep, the off wheels fairly lifted from the ground.

Stranway's face was stern and set now. The desperate end of his work was still to come—he had to *stop*—at Parker's Landing. Rolver, with a revolver and his wits about him, would make ugly work; but Rolver, with his attention distracted by a run whose headlong speed threatened disaster every second, would be quite a different antagonist!

"Take the first side road, and give them the slip!" Rolver shouted now over the thunder of the car.

Stranway shook his head.

"Not yet," he yelled back. "No good! We're not far enough ahead. They could see us for miles."

A roar like the echo from canyon walls was around them. Like speed-maniacs running amuck, they were flying through the main street of a town. Stranway recognized it—the next was Parker's Landing, five miles away.

They were in the open again. Stranway glanced at his companion. Rolver was clinging desperately to his seat with both hands, his revolver dangling from his little finger where it was crooked in the trigger-guard. The man's face was strained and white now, and the wind, flattening back mustache and beard, gave his face a hollow, cadaverous look.

The minutes passed—and with them the miles. Imperceptibly, Stranway began to check. They flashed into the upper end of Parker's Landing. Down the street Stranway located the bank, and a little farther on—just past the street he wanted—he saw a number of farmers' wagons, massed together and moving slowly, which completely blocked the road. A smile flickered across Stranway's lips. Keen, clever, old Charlebois!

"We can't get by; we'll have to turn up here," he bellowed at Rolver. "Hang on tight!"

The car swerved around the corner with a hair-lifting skid that brought it toward the right-hand curb of the side street. "Second house up," Charlebois had said. There it was—just ahead! Stranway's lips compressed into a thin line, and, as he suddenly jammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a jarring, grinding halt that almost pitched Rolver from the seat, his right hand shot out and landed a blow on the other's wrist that knocked the revolver to the floor of the car. The next instant he flung himself free of the wheel and grappled with the other.

Both pitched forward, and, crashing into the windshield, shattered it to splinters. Rolver, aroused now, fought like a wildcat—but the struggle lasted barely a minute. Two men rushed from the house opposite which Stranway had stopped the car, grasped Rolver unceremoniously, and, with Stranway aiding, yanked the man from the car, hustled him across the sidewalk and into the house, where, in what was evidently a doctor's consulting room, Henri Raoul Charlebois, an elderly woman, and a police officer were standing.

Rolver, panting and gasping, glared about him wildly.

"What's the meaning of this?" he blustered. "Eh? What's the meaning of this outrage?"

"Peter Rolver," said the little old gentleman quietly, "do you recognize this room?"

"No; I don't!" snarled Rolver. "How should I? I never saw it before."

"I had hoped you might," murmured Charlebois gently. "I am greatly disappointed. Let me tell you about it, then. This used to be the consulting room of a physician by the name of Doctor Hebron H. Kearn.

On a certain night, the eighteenth of October, two years ago, the bank in this town was robbed of nearly two hundred thousand dollars; on the evening following, about nine o'clock, a man, a stranger in the town, called at this office. He wore a checked suit, and so far as his identity could be established, in weight, build and general appearance, it corresponds in every detail with—yourself. It has taken those two years to find you. Of the crime committed that night, of the man who, now under sentence of death, awaits execution to-morrow, I——"

Rolver, as if moved by some sudden relief, interrupted with a hoarse laugh.

"So that's it, is it?" he sneered. "That's what all the fuss is about, is it? And supposing I was this man, which I am not, and supposing I was in this town that night, which I was not, a town whose name even now I do not know, what difference would it make and what would it prove? I'll make you smart for this, you doddering, officious old idiot! So you take it upon yourself, do you, to imagine that I'm your precious individual of the mysterious checked suit, eh?"

Charlebois shook his head.

"No," he said slowly; "you are wrong. You do me an injustice. I did think so up to two hours ago—but I was mistaken." Charlebois' voice rose suddenly, and rang through the room stern and cold. "No; you are not the stranger of the checked suit—you are a despicable coward-soul who would send an innocent man to a horrible and ignominious death! *You are Doctor Hebron H. Kearn himself!*"

"Me—Kearn?" Rolver screamed, trying to free himself from the two men who held him. "Why, you blasted old fool, you're crazy! Curse you, what sort of a game are you trying to play?"

"Silence!" commanded Charlebois harshly. "You have grown a beard and a mustache. I take it, the natural blond was beginning to show again at the roots, and you deemed it wise to have not only your beard and mustache, but your hair as well, re-dyed when you left the boat this morning. Of course, you did not know you were watched. You see your identity was a simple matter then. Mrs. MacPherson"—Charlebois turned to the woman, Doctor Kearn's old housekeeper—"do you recognize the doctor in this man?"

"I—I do not know," stammered Mrs. MacPherson nervously. "I think so; but—but I am not sure."

"It doesn't matter what she thinks—or any of the rest of you, either!" yelled Rolver furiously. "I tell you I never even heard of the man!"

"The matter is very easily settled," said Charlebois coldly. "We have but to send for a barber and have the beard and mustache removed. I think then, even with your hair still black, Mrs. MacPherson will have little trouble in recognizing you."

"You daren't!" shouted Rolver. "I——"

"Dare!" Charlebois' little form seemed to tower into height, and there was a deadly glitter in the steel-blue eyes. "There is a man, you hound, that because of you sits to-day in a cell in Sing Sing with the death watch at his door. Dare! Do I need tell you that I would——"

"I hardly think it will be necessary, sir." The officer, the town's chief of police, had stepped forward, and was staring intently into Rolver's face. "He's Doctor Kearn, right enough. I'll take my oath on it."

"Ah!" said Charlebois sharply. "Then that is enough! Take him into custody, chief! I charge him with the murder of that unknown man who came

to this office on the evening following the bank robbery."

Rolver stared like a hunted man around him; then suddenly, in collapse, he flung out his arms to Charlebois.

"No, no; not that!" he cried. "Not that—and I'll tell."

"I thought that would bring you to a clearer light," said Charlebois grimly. "You prefer the charge of bank robbery to that of murder, do you not?"

The man's face was ghastly in its pallor, his nerve was completely gone, and he twisted his fingers together, locking and unlocking them.

"I am Doctor Kearn," he said jerkily. "I—I robbed the bank. The next evening that stranger came to my office to consult me professionally. It was his heart. He dropped dead on the floor of this room—my consulting room. Then Marlin arrived in the outer office, accusing me of the bank robbery. We quarrelled, and I bluffed it out; but I knew he had me, for, if a search were made, the money would be found. He left. He didn't know what had happened in the consulting room. I went back into the consulting room —and the idea came to me in a sudden flash. I knew Marlin's quarrel with me had been heard from the street, because a man had come to the door to ask what the row was about. The dead man was exactly my height and build, same color eyes and hair—there was just the face that was different. I—I marred that with a surgical instrument; then I made a wound in his wrist, and bandaged it to correspond with the one I then had on my own; and then I took his clothes, and put mine on him. Then I made an entry in my diary, as of the day previous, intimating that I believed Marlin guilty. I got the stolen money together

and turned out the lights. I waited until long after midnight, then stole to Marlin's place, got into the woodshed, and left five thousand dollars there. I took his hammer, which I found there among his other tools, brought it back here, and left it under the desk, after putting some blood stains on it. I didn't dare take a team or any public conveyance out of town—I walked. I hid in the woods the next day. The next night I reached New York, bought new clothes, destroyed the ones I was wearing, and—and that is all."

"All!" Charlebois' voice quivered with mingled passion, contempt and loathing. "All! You have sounded the depths of human infamy—and that is all!" He turned to the chief of police. "Take him!" he said. "I will notify the Governor, and secure Marlin's release. And you, Mrs. MacPherson, I do not think we shall need to bring you further into this; thank you for coming."

A moment later, save for Stranway and Charlebois, the room was empty. The little old gentleman walked to the window, and for a time stood silently looking out. When he turned to Stranway again his face was changed—full of a kindly, gentle light, and the steel-blue eyes were soft and tender.

"In a little cottage not far from here," he said, "there is a brave, gray-haired, broken-hearted, sorrowing woman. Let us go to her, my boy, and make her glad."

CHAPTER XIV

THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

DEATH and danger. There are debit entries there as well. Powerful men to-day are amongst those whose names are on the debit side, men who strike in the black of night, who fight with unbuttoned foils, who turn like rats at bay to save themselves, and from these, their craft and resources, comes the danger I have warned you of"—Charlebois' words, spoken long ago at their first meeting, were ringing in Stranway's ears as though they were of but yesterday, of but an hour before.

Henri Raoul Charlebois was gone! For weeks following the arrest of Rolver at Parker's Landing, no untoward event had taken place in Dominic Court, nothing had occurred that seemed in any way related to so dire a climax as this, and yet without warning, without sign or trace of him, the strange little old gentleman of Dominic Court had disappeared.

Three days had passed since the discovery of Charlebois' disappearance had been made, three days of ceaseless work and anxiety that had brought a gray, haggard look into Stranway's face and black rings under the eyes grown heavy and dulled from lack of rest. But there were still no details, still not a single clue. It was all summed up in the one word—gone.

It had been early morning when suspicion had first been aroused that something was wrong, and Stranway, summoned hurriedly from his near-by apartment on Sixth Avenue, had acted instantly. Out into the dawn

from 1, 1½, 2 and 2½ Dominic Court, from those four quaint, old-fashioned Dutch houses, secluded in their little courtyard yet in the very center of New York—*four* separate and distinct dwellings to the profane, *one* to the initiated—went men and women in the garb of many callings, efficient, faithful, keen of brain, the very flower, indeed, of that marvellous organization that Charlebois had brought into being. And likewise, following fast on this move, cipher messages had flashed their warnings from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast, from the far north of Canada to the southernmost parts of America, to the capitals of Europe, to the remote places of the earth, to wherever a member, a sworn brother or sister of the organization was at work. As a general facing a crisis from the enemy's unexpected attack hurls his battalions into the fray, so Stranway had hurled into the breach the mighty force at his command, and, awakening into life a gigantic, latent power, had loosed it upon the issue—and the result had been *nothing.*

Nothing! The days had passed and there had been —nothing. Somewhere upon one of the pages of the Red Ledger lay the answer, Stranway knew. But upon which page? Of that mass of accounts, which nowhere had ever known their counterpart, that record of the days when, poor and friendless, some had aided Charlebois and some had crushed him down into blacker depths of misery—which?

Death and danger! Too well Stranway understood the stark significance of those words; too well he knew their actual, living reality! Too often, to accomplish his ends, to pay his grimmer debts the little old gentleman had jeopardized his life, knowing no obstacle, recognizing no difficulty, stern, dogged, determined, pursuing his way with a relentless will, swerving

neither to the right nor to the left. "Red is neither warm nor cold"—a grim maxim that of Charlebois! As he paid a debt on the credit side, counting never the cost, bringing happiness and joy into the lives of those who once had brought a ray of sunlight into his own; so, too, on the debit side, he paid as surely and as impartially—*at maturity*. A queer and seemingly contradictory trait this, when measured against the gentle-souled nature of the man that shone out in acts of quixotic generosity and tenderness! Revenge, vindictiveness, maliciousness, this other side of him? No—it was far from that! Justice, simple and impartial, Charlebois himself had called it—and he had been right. In no case had any act of his brought punishment or retribution that was not merited a thousandfold by deeds and wrong-living subsequent to the original entry on the debit side; an entry that came to stand, indeed, as no more than a compass needle pointing its undeviating course—a course here of crime and murder, and ill-spent, worthless lives.

And now as, toward evening on the third day since Charlebois' disappearance, Stranway sat at the old mahogany desk in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court, where the little old gentleman in red velvet jacket with tassel bobbing from red skull-cap was wont to sit, a dread, cold and numbing, lay heavily upon his heart. Had what he had feared for months come finally to pass? Had Henri Raoul Charlebois, in spite of his master intellect and with almost limitless resources at his command, met his match at last—and his death? Was the last line ruled in the Red Ledger, the pages of that strange volume closed forever? It seemed so; for, with every effort expended, there had been no single return on which to base even a desperate hope.

Apathetically, listlessly, as he had done a dozen times before in the last two hours, to listen to reports whose fruitless tenor, whose note almost of despair never varied—for those others, too, loved the master for whose life they feared—Stranway lifted the telephone receiver from its hook, as the bell rang, and placed it to his ear. For an instant he listened—then the chair crashed to the floor behind him, as, in his excitement, he sprang to his feet and snatched the instrument up bodily.

"Say that again!" he shouted wildly into the transmitter.

Once more a woman's voice in low, calm, even tones came over the wire:

"The Orchid is speaking. Is that Ewen Stranway?"

For a moment Stranway could neither control his voice nor the riot of emotion that surged upon him. The Orchid! She, at least, was safe, then! It was *her* voice! She was safe! During the last three days he had searched for her—something that he had never felt warranted in doing before, much as she had come to mean to him—and he had searched for her during those three days almost as desperately as he had searched for Charlebois. The mystery with which she had surrounded herself and the secret of which only Charlebois knew, had suggested the possible chance that *she* might hold the key to the little old gentleman's disappearance; and, also, for this very reason, he had been almost as mad with fear on her account as he had been on Charlebois'. If this mystery that linked Charlebois and herself together had anything to do with what had befallen Charlebois, then, since no warning and no word had come from her, it could mean only that she, too, had shared the little old gentleman's fate.

"You!" he cried now. "Thank God! Thank God! I have been searching for you for the last three days. Every member of the organization has been searching for you. Charlebois——"

"Charlebois is safe," she interrupted quickly.

"Safe! You are sure? You are absolutely sure of what you say?" Stranway's tones were feverishly quick, imperative, hoarse with emotion.

"Yes, he is safe; quite safe," she reiterated quietly.

"Then, thank God for that, too!" Stranway gasped in relief. "Where is he? What has happened?"

"Much," she answered. "Much more than there is time to explain now. Listen! These are his orders, and you will understand enough from them to guide you. The rest you will learn from him later. You are to take all papers pertaining to the case of Doctor Hadley Meers—*all,* be careful that you take them all; especially the one signed by a man named Peter Minter, which is in the safe—and be at the Hapsburg Rathskeller on the Bowery at seven-thirty to-night. You will see Charlebois there, but you must neither speak to him nor approach him unless he signals to you to do so. When he leaves, follow him wherever he goes, but keep at a safe enough distance so that his companion, who will be Doctor Meers, will have no suspicion he is under surveillance. If Meers for an instant is put upon his guard it will be fatal to Charlebois' plans—and probably to Charlebois himself. Is this perfectly clear? The Hapsburg Rathskeller at seven-thirty—all papers on the Meers case—and do not go near Charlebois, simply keep him in sight. Is this clear?"

A great load seemed to have been lifted from Stranway's shoulders—and from his mind. Charlebois, too, then, was safe—had been working toward the

climax of a case in his own peculiar way—he was safe. And now, anxiety swept suddenly aside, the Orchid claimed for a moment all of Stranway's interest. The last time he had seen her had been that day when she had sat at the next table to him in the dining-room of the Brabant-Lorraine, and he had not been able to say a single word to her; but now, at least, though he could not see her, he could in any event talk to her, plead with her, as a matter of fact, to let down, if only just a little way, the barriers that she—

"Hello! Hello!" She was speaking again, evidently a little anxious and disturbed by his silence. "Mr. Stranway! Are you there? Is everything *perfectly* clear?"

"Perfectly!" he replied instantly. "I will see to everything!" Then eagerly: "But you! Think of the last time I saw you! Not a chance for even a word! Haven't you got any pity—any mercy? Don't you know that you——"

"I—I dare not stay here," she broke in hurriedly; and then, her voice suddenly lowered, agitated: "Will you believe me if I tell you that I—I am sorry? Good-by!"

She had rung off.

For a moment Stranway stared helplessly at the telephone; then a whimsical smile gathered on his lips, as, with an exaggerated attempt at nonchalance, he replaced the instrument on the desk—it was a long lane that had no turning, some day he would have his innings!

He went quickly to the safe, opened it, took out the brass-bound Red Ledger, and the little key that unlocked its three great hasps. He opened the volume and turned to the index pages. Doctor Hadley Meers: it was a case that Charlebois had never spoken to

him about; one of those, probably, that had long lain dormant only to spring suddenly now, at the psychological moment, into life and prominence. His finger ran down the column of names under "M," and stopped: "Meers; Hadley, M. D. . . . Page 119."

Stranway turned the leaves of the book rapidly, found the page—and, with a quick, sharp intake of his breath, stared at the entry before him. Queer, bizarre, enigmatical—he was prepared for that. Strange without exception was each and every entry in that still stranger book, but this was perhaps the strangest of them all! Grim, significant, premonitory, a single word on the debit side leaped out at him: *"Suicide."*

Stranway's lips thinned, and a hard glint came into his eyes. There was stern work here, then; work that promised a fitting ending to the three days and nights just passed. Suicide! Whose? When? Where? What did it mean? Who was this Doctor Hadley Meers upon whom Charlebois evidently now was closing down, and closing down none the less irrevocably, none the less surely, for the many years that had elapsed since the act, whatever it might have been that had caused this bald, gruesome entry, had taken place?

The open page before him afforded neither answer nor solution. He closed the Ledger, locked it, and put it back in the safe. As he straightened up, he looked at his watch. It was six-thirty. There was an hour, then, before he was due at the rendezvous—ample time to gather the papers together that Charlebois required.

He stepped now to the filing cabinet, opened a drawer, and, selecting from the neatly banded packets

the one marked with the doctor's name, returned with it to the desk. The packet contained a large number of single sheets, perhaps a hundred in all, many of them bearing but a few brief sentences—the regular form of "report" used by the organization. Placing the pile face downward before him, he drew the red-shaded reading lamp nearer to him, and, beginning at the top report, the one of earliest date, commenced to run through them rapidly. The first dated back some twenty years; after that, two or three reports bridged a space of five years; perhaps double that number related to a succeeding period of six or seven years; and then for each following year they began to grow gradually more voluminous, both in number and text, until the last fifty of them bore dates scattered over no more distant a time than the past twelve months.

At the end of some twenty minutes, Stranway had acquainted himself with the case of Doctor Hadley Meers, so far as the reports went—and a puzzled expression settled on his face. There was little in any of them that was at all out of the ordinary, much less anything that threw any light upon that ominous entry in the Red Ledger. Briefly summarized, Doctor Hadley Meers had started practice as a physician in New York when comparatively a young man twenty-four years before; his practice had grown steadily; he was generally regarded as a clever and reputable man in his profession, and apparently lived a quiet and unostentatious life; also, he operated an exclusive private sanatorium for the ultra-rich during the summer months on an island a few miles past Hell Gate within the Sound, and transferred his patients from there during the winter to an establishment on West 103rd Street. That was all, except for two of the re-

ports, one dated three months ago, the other within the present month, which, attracting Stranway's particular attention, he had set aside from the rest and now picked up to read over again.

The first read: "George Heaton Loud, patient, died 3:05 this morning. Diagnosis: Typhoid."

The second read: "Henry Kenneth Loud, patient, died 2:10 this afternoon. Diagnosis: Typhoid."

Stranway frowned over these for another minute. The similarity in names was glaringly in evidence, and the death of these two men was obviously in some way pertinent to the case, since, otherwise, two deaths in the large clientele of a practicing physician would not have been singled out—but in what way these typhoid cases were pertinent he had no idea. He slipped the two reports back amongst the others, and rose from his chair. He had still to secure the paper signed by Peter Minter. The Orchid had said that it was in the safe. He returned to the safe, and began to search rapidly through the compartment reserved for important papers. Perhaps this was it! A long envelope, sealed, across which a date was written in Charlebois' angular hand, caught his eye: "October 14th."

It was the day of Charlebois' disappearance!

CHAPTER XV

THE ACCUSATION

STRANWAY took the envelope from the safe, tore it open, and extracted the four closely written sheets of foolscap that it contained; and at the bottom of the last sheet, to his satisfaction, found the name, "Peter Minter," signed in a firm, bold hand.

Standing there by the safe, he glanced cursorily through a paragraph here and there; then his eyes riveted first on one phrase and then on another; and then, with a sharp, startled exclamation, he ran the few steps to the desk, spread out the sheets of foolscap beneath the lamp, and began to read intently. The document was dated from Meers' Island, October 13th, the day prior to Charlebois' endorsement on the envelope, and ran as follows:

"I, Peter Minter, A.M., M.D., do solemnly declare, with Almighty God as my witness, that one Henry Kenneth Loud, who died in Doctor Meers' sanatorium at West 103rd Street on October 12th of this year, was murdered by Doctor Hadley Meers at the instigation of Loud's nephew, Horace Loud; and I do further declare that it is now my belief that George Heaton Loud, elder brother of Henry Kenneth Loud, came to his death some three months previously in the same manner.

"I am constrained to make this statement in writing for two reasons: First, because I desire to see

the criminals brought to justice; second, because I have reason to believe that Doctor Meers suspects I know the truth, and I fear that I may not *live* to appear against him publicly on the witness stand. He is a desperate man. I am already closely watched —in reality his prisoner in the summer sanatorium on the Sound, now vacated for the winter, where I was brought on the specious pretext of completing some of his research work in the laboratory here.

"Of my connection with Doctor Meers I must briefly speak. Until a year ago, I was professor of pathology at the State University. At that time Doctor Meers approached me, and made me a very favorable offer to associate myself with him. He was greatly interested in the pathological side of his profession, and had splendidly equipped laboratories, whose charge he desired me to assume. This appealed to me strongly, and I accepted the offer. So much for myself.

"Horace Loud, the nephew, was very intimate with Doctor Meers—and not altogether in a friendly way. For reasons which I shall not attempt to give in detail here, I became aware that Doctor Meers stood in fear of the other on account of a disgraceful piece of malpractice which had terminated fatally, and in which both were implicated.

"George Heaton Loud, the elder of the two uncles, a bachelor, was enormously wealthy, having inherited, under the old English law of entail, large British estates from his father. On his death, the property passed to his brother, Henry Kenneth Loud, also a bachelor—on Henry's death, Horace Loud, whose father was the youngest son of the house and already sometime dead, became sole heir-at-law. Neither of the uncles, who were sedate, serious men, would

have anything to do with their nephew, who, I have cause to know, led a wild and reckless life, since on several occasions during the past year he was an inmate of one or other of our sanatoriums suffering from the effects of dissipation of the most degraded character. This nephew, Horace Loud, had a very small settlement which he must have spent many times over in his mad excesses. He was heavily in debt; and, I believe, by constantly forcing further supplies of money from Doctor Meers caused the financial stringency which I began to notice some six months after my association with Doctor Meers, and which worried the latter greatly.

"These facts are merely cumulative, pointing the motive to crimes so abhorrent in their conception and perpetration as to be almost beyond belief. I come now to the direct evidence. From my first association with Doctor Meers, a very considerable portion of my laboratory time was devoted to the study of typhus, typhoid and analogous diseases, pathologically. I was, and always have been, greatly interested in this, as in some schools the theory of the pathogenic micro-organism of typhoid was at one time held in dispute. I do not here propose to enter into a scientific discussion of the question—it has been proved and established beyond possibility of doubt that *bacillus typhosus* produces typhoid. Our object was the comparative study of typhus and typhoid; and we had in the laboratory at the time of the first brother's admittance to the sanatorium a small quantity of typhoid bacteria—these germs, or virus, being in their most pronounced and malignant form. At this time I noticed that some of this had been taken, and I spoke to Doctor Meers about it. He said he had taken it for animal experimentation. This, naturally, not only

satisfied me, but caused me to forget the circumstance entirely. The patient—I am speaking now of George Heaton Loud—when first admitted, exhibited a low, run-down condition that might be the precursory symptoms of any number of diseases. During this period, Doctor Meers once or twice administered a hypodermic injection which, upon my remarking on the treatment, he informed me was a mild stimulant of some harmless nature—just exactly what he said it was now I do not recollect. In due course Loud's diagnosis was typhoid. The patient progressed favorably, then relapsed—and died. Five weeks ago, the other brother was admitted, and exactly similar circumstances attended him—except that in this case the patient died without it being necessary to induce a relapse.

"I was present on one of the occasions when Doctor Meers administered the hypodermic injection to the last named patient. It was in the sanatorium on 103rd Street. I remember accompanying Doctor Meers from the room immediately following the treatment, and that he was in a hurry to keep some outside appointment—his car was waiting at the door. He hurried into his light overcoat, and, as he half ran through the front hall, still struggling with the coat, his hypodermic case fell from his inner coat pocket. I did not notice it until he had closed the street door, and, in fact, was driving off. I picked it up, took it back to the laboratory, put it in the drawer of my desk, intending to return it to him—and forgot all about it. I might say that he, significantly enough now in view of what followed, made no mention of having lost it!

"During all this time I had not the slightest suspicion that anything was wrong; nor would my sus-

picions, in all probability, ever have been aroused had it not been that yesterday, and perhaps an hour after Henry Loud's death, I overheard a few words of a conversation between Horace Loud and Doctor Meers. There is a short hallway leading to the laboratory from the front of the house, and as I was passing along this on my way to the laboratory—which no one but Doctor Meers and myself was permitted to enter—I was surprised to hear voices and stopped to listen. I shall not detail this conversation. At almost the first words I stood transfixed, appalled with horror. They spoke of a large sum of money that Horace Loud would at once borrow on his prospects, an *agreed* amount of which was to be turned over to Meers. Loud, now that the deed was done, appeared from his tones to be uneasy and fearful; Doctor Meers, on the other hand, seemed callous, confident, self-centered, and assured Loud of the *impossibility of detection.* It came upon me like a flash, the meaning of the whole train of circumstances. I stole noiselessly from the hallway to the front part of the house, and pretended to busy myself there until they appeared; then I hurried back to the laboratory, and took out Doctor Meers' hypodermic from where I had placed it in my desk.

"There were two or three drops of liquid in the syringe. Weak, sick with dread, I began my task. At the end I remember wiping a cold, clammy perspiration from my forehead. The hypodermic contained *bacillus typhosus*—the man lying dead upstairs had been murdered by the inoculation of typhoid germs.

"I have little more to add. Shortly after my tests were completed, and while I was still trying to compose my mind to a calm consideration of what my

first act should be, Doctor Meers came suddenly into the laboratory. He saw the hypodermic on the desk and at once asked me where I got it. I told him. He made some remark about being glad to get it back again, and put it in his pocket. He had no specific reason to believe that I mistrusted anything, much less that I had made an analysis of the contents of the syringe—but it is certain that his suspicions were instantly aroused. He dared, of course, give no open intimation that such was the fact in view of the possibility that I knew nothing. He adopted a precautionary course until he could satisfy himself one way or the other. For the rest of that afternoon, on one pretext or another, he was with me constantly; and in the evening he insisted on my accompanying him to the summer sanatorium on this island and left me here, apparently free, but actually under the guard of an old servant of his, ostensibly for the purpose of completing some unfinished experiments in this laboratory—where I am now writing this statement. I came here, realizing that to refuse was but to make his suspicion a certainty—and to invite my own death. I am, then, unrestrained in my movements, but as much a prisoner as though behind barred doors, for without a boat I cannot leave the island as the distance to the mainland is too great to think of swimming. I do not know what the end will be.

"But one word more. The question will arise as to how the two brothers became inmates of the Doctor's private hospital in the first place, and as to the *necessarily* fatal termination of typhoid in the second place. The first could be accounted for in a hundred ways. Doctor Meers was their family physician and socially intimate with them; numberless means, therefore, presented themselves of administering any one

of many drugs in food or drink that would produce a slight general debility sufficient to cause them to seek his advice professionally—which would result in his suggesting the sanatorium for a period of observation pending a diagnosis that he could pretend puzzled him. After that, when under treatment—he is far too clever to have attempted it before—he could have recourse to inoculation, and well developed symptoms of typhoid in natural course would ensue. As to the fatal termination of the disease, that very point enhances the fiendish ingenuity of the crime. How safe, how sure for the perpetrator! The phrase itself, 'murdered by typhoid,' sounds an absurdity—and yet, just God! it is true. The disease fatal? Not necessarily in its first attack—it took *two* for the elder brother—but, relapse after relapse induced, the inevitable end is death.

"If anything happens to me, if I am unable to escape from here, I pray that God in His infinite justice will direct this paper into proper hands.

"PETER MINTER."

Stranway's brain was whirling as he folded up the sheets of foolscap. Crime in its many shades, in its varying degrees, was no stranger to him, but none he had ever met before had been like this in Machiavellian originality. Murdered by typhoid!—the inhuman deviltry of it was like an icy hand at his heart. And then came crowding upon him question after question. This document—how did it get into Charlebois' safe? Where was this Peter Minter now?—at the island sanatorium?—*alive or dead?* And Charlebois—what part, matching his wits against those of this fiend Meers, had he played that had kept him hidden, absent, all these days? And suicide—what

bearing on all this had that grim debit entry on the Red Ledger's page?

He pulled out his watch again. The perusal of Minter's statement had taken him longer than he had imagined—it was already ten minutes after seven. Stranway pushed a button on the desk, then turned, closed and locked the safe, gathered up the reports, put Minter's statement into a fresh envelope, sealed this, and placed it with the report in his pocket.

The red-silken portière before the glass-panelled door leading to No. 2 Dominic Court was lifted aside, and a man entered the room.

"Ah, Verot—you, eh?" Stranway said quickly. "Remain here—I am going out. Tell whoever reports either by phone or in person that their work is ended. Charlebois is found."

"Found!" Verot cried excitedly. *"Bon Dieu,* that is the best news I have ever had, unless"—his face clouded with sudden anxiety—"unless he has been harmed."

"He has not been harmed. Everything is all right," Stranway answered hurriedly, moving toward the door as he spoke. "Take charge—I'm off, and not an instant to lose. Good-by!"

He hastened from the room, and, a minute later, after traversing the little courtyard, emerged on Sixth Avenue. Here, he hailed a passing taxi.

"Hapsburg Rathskeller—and hurry!" he flung at the chauffeur.

CHAPTER XVI

STACKED CARDS

IT was seven-thirty to the minute as Stranway entered the famous Bohemian resort. The place was crowded. Every one of the tables in the dining-room appeared to be occupied. A waiter approached him, offering to find him a seat. Stranway declined politely. His eyes, sweeping over the room, had singled out the familiar figure of a little gray-haired old gentleman, seated at a table in the far corner opposite a heavy-built, well-dressed, clean-shaven man—the latter, evidently, Doctor Hadley Meers.

The first thing to do was to acquaint Charlebois with the fact that he had arrived. Stranway strolled, then, nonchalantly up the center of the room and back again, as though in search of some one—carefully ignoring, however, by both look and manner the corner table. By the door again, he shot a quick glance at the table; and then, turning, he went directly out of the Rathskeller, crossed the street and took up his position, waiting, in the shadow of a doorway. Charlebois had seen him. The little old gentleman and his companion had risen from their table, and were preparing to leave as he, Stranway, had stepped out of the café.

Presently the two men came out and walked down the street. Stranway paralleled them on the other side—then, as they mounted the steps of the first elevated station and he heard the rumble of a down-

town train approaching, he hurried across the street and followed them up the stairs. As they entered a car, Stranway slipped through the gate at the opposite end of the same car, and took his place on the platform.

The two men got off at Brooklyn Bridge, Stranway trailing them. From here, walking again, and to Stranway's constantly increasing bewilderment and wonder at their ultimate destination, they struck down the side streets, heading east—and then, at the end of ten minutes, enlightenment came to him suddenly. The two men had turned abruptly riverward, and now came out upon the Clivedale & Hearn Company's dock, where Charlebois' large ocean-going yacht was always berthed when in port. She lay there now, a thing of beauty even in the darkness, her portholes flashing light, the decks flooded with a soft white glow, the upper works rising in shadowy outline, the trim masts towering above until tops and rigging, blending into blackness, lost themselves in the night.

A grim smile played on Stranway's lips as he watched the two men go aboard. It was plain enough now—the reason why he was to bring the papers, the meaning of it all. Charlebois would play out the last act of the tragedy free from interference aboard his own yacht. "I pay all—at maturity," Charlebois was wont to say. Stranway hurried forward. *At maturity!* That time, then, had come!

Both men had disappeared through the saloon companionway as Stranway reached the gangway. Known, naturally, to every officer and member of the crew, he stepped to the yacht's deck unchallenged. A moment later the yacht cast off, and, forging out into the river, began slowly to gather way.

Charlebois would, of course, know that he, Stranway, was aboard, and would send for him undoubtedly when it best suited the little old gentleman's purpose; so Stranway made his way forward and mounted the bridge to await a summons. Kendall, the yacht's commander, greeted him with a cordial handshake and a brief word, and left him to his own devices—the navigation of the East River at any hour of the day or night demanded an undivided attention.

Stranway walked to the end of the bridge and leaned on the rail, watching the scene around him—the soft glow, as a background, over both Manhattan and Brooklyn; the nearer lights, that took on individual form; the spider web of steel cables that made the massive bridges, wavering in the darkness overhead, as the yacht passed beneath them; the dark, wall-like fringe of silent factories and warehouses at the water's edge; and, on the river itself, about him, up and down, in every direction, the myriad, twinkling lights, like so many fireflies, from passing tugs and barges, from bustling ferries and river craft of every description. It was like a kaleidoscopic picture, ever changing, bringing some new charm and interest every instant.

And then, gradually, the river traffic began to thin out; but it was not until Hell Gate was safely negotiated that Captain Kendall, evidently more at his leisure now with the clearer sweep of the Sound before him, lighted a cigar, spoke a few words to the quartermaster at the wheel, and strolled toward Stranway's end of the bridge.

Stranway turned to meet the other. There was more than one question that he wanted to ask—and first of all what their destination was. But before he could speak there came the summons he had been

expecting every moment since the yacht had left New York.

"Beg pardon, Captain Kendall; but is Mr. Stranway on the bridge?" a voice hailed from the deck.

"I'm here," said Stranway quickly, anticipating the commander's answer, and already halfway to the deck as he spoke.

"Thank you, sir," said the man, a steward, as Stranway joined him. "Mr. Charlebois would like to see you, sir, in the main saloon."

"Very well," Stranway replied.

He hurried aft, descended the companionway, and, reaching the closed door of the saloon, stood there for a moment hesitantly. A feeling that somehow all was not well, that Charlebois for once was playing too confidently with edged tools, had come suddenly upon him. This Doctor Meers was not only a desperate character, but he obviously belonged to that type of criminal which was the most dangerous of all—highly educated, with the trained mind of a student, and full of resource, the man had given evidence of possessing an ingenuity that was Satanic. Then Stranway smiled a little whimsically to himself. He had yet to see a move made, a game played by Charlebois in which the little old gentleman was not at every stage of it the master. What he, Stranway, knew of Doctor Meers, Charlebois knew, too—and much more besides.

He rapped sharply at the door, and entered. A long table with revolving chairs ran up the center of the saloon. At the head of this table at the far end of the saloon, and with his back to a little alleyway that ran still farther forward to give access to the staterooms beyond, the little old gentleman sat crouched forward in his chair. Pacing backward and forward across the lower end of the table by the en-

trance was Doctor Hadley Meers. The saloon itself was but dimly lighted. All this Stranway caught in a single glance as he closed the door and halted with his back to it.

It was Doctor Meers who spoke first—sharply, imperatively:

"You are Mr. Stranway?"

"Yes," said Stranway quietly.

"You have brought certain papers with you?"

Stranway shot a quick look, seeking his clue, toward the head of the table. The little old gentleman gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head.

"I have," acknowledged Stranway.

"Then kindly let me have them," requested the Doctor, extending his hand.

Again Stranway glanced up the room, and again he caught the affirmative gesture. And then without hesitation he took the papers from his pocket and handed them to Doctor Meers. Unquestioning obedience—Charlebois had exacted that oath from him long ago when he had first joined the organization—and he gave it now. But, bewildered and nonplussed though he was at this act that delivered over to the actual murderer himself the evidence that would have brought the merited retribution of a death sentence, Stranway's face showed no emotion as he watched Meers seat himself and begin to examine the papers.

The man appeared absolutely at his ease, confident, wholly in control of the situation. After a few minutes over the reports, he looked up at the single figure seated at the tablehead, and a sardonic smile curled his thin lips.

"Very exhaustive, very—I compliment you!" he sneered.

Stranway, too, looked up, expecting a reply—and,

his eyes sweeping past the little old gentleman, he barely repressed a sudden, startled exclamation. Meers had swung around in his seat again, so that, as well as the little old gentleman, he now had his back to the alleyway, and, having torn open the envelope containing Minter's statement, was scanning the damning testimony rapidly. A moment before the alleyway had been empty—but now the Orchid stood there in the doorway, and Stranway saw that her great, dark eyes, full of some strange significance, were fixed intently upon him.

"Ah!" The exclamation, half snarl of rage, half cry of triumph, burst suddenly from Meers' lips—and then he began to tear the foolscap sheets with quick, vicious jerks of his fingers into little shreds. "You, sir"—the words came with fierce abruptness, and his arm shot out pointing at Stranway—"you. sir; do you know what this document contained?"

Stranway's eyes were still on the Orchid, and now at the question she raised her fingers instantly to her lips, shaking her head; then, with a hurried gesture toward the little old gentleman, as though beckoning Stranway to approach the latter, she drew back—and was gone.

A fraction of a second the pantomime had taken—no more—and Stranway's reply came without apparent pause or delay.

"I am not in the habit of opening sealed envelopes that do not belong to me, sir," he said sharply, with well-simulated indignation in his tones.

Meers' response was a grunt—but a grunt, evidently, of satisfaction.

The Orchid's gesture toward Charlebois—what had it meant? Stranway looked from one man to the other, striving to intercept some signal from the little

old gentleman; and then, dazing him with its possibilities, a hint of her meaning came to him. He turned to Doctor Meers.

"If nothing more is required of me," he said with a disarming smile, "I have a message to deliver to Mr. Charlebois, and then I will leave you two gentlemen to yourselves."

As he spoke, he stepped forward past Meers in the direction of the little old gentleman. Meers rose hastily from his seat, and grasped Stranway's arm—but not before Stranway had covered half the distance.

"Your message, I am afraid," Meers said brusquely, "will have to wait. Mr. Charlebois and myself are engaged on a very important matter. You may leave us—*now!* I am quite sure that Mr. Charlebois agrees with me."

Stranway glanced swiftly at the little old gentleman, and received the same nod of assent as before. But now, though his brain was suddenly in turmoil and the blood was pounding fiercely through his veins, not a muscle of Stranway's face moved.

"Very good," he said calmly—and, walking quietly to the door, left the saloon.

But once outside, his mask of composure vanished, and he rushed for the deck. *Some one was impersonating Charlebois!* The man at the head of the table was no more Charlebois than the President of the United States! He, Stranway, had got close enough to the other before Meers had stopped him, to assure himself of that. At a little distance, in the dim light, the impersonation was clever, the deception perfect, and that was why, presumably, he was neither to approach nor speak to Charlebois—but those were the instructions that had come from the Orchid herself, the instructions *she* had telephoned him! What did it

mean? What contradictory, unaccountable part was she playing? Was she being used by Meers—in Meers' power? If so, where was the real Charlebois? And the evidence against Meers was gone now—destroyed! The very daring, the almost incredible nerve displayed by Meers in this move of his had brought success—if obtaining possession of that paper, which meant life or death to the man, was success. But how did Meers know that the paper had ever existed? How did Meers know that it had been in Dominic Court? And Minter—where was Minter now? And what was to follow? Who was this man who was playing the rôle of Charlebois—was it Loud, the nephew, the accomplice of Meers?

Stranway shook his head grimly. He could not answer any of these questions; but, at least, Meers and this other man were aboard here now among Charlebois' men, and in his, Stranway's, power. Whatever else happened, they would not escape; and before he was through with them Meers would answer to him for Charlebois! He ran swiftly forward and called Captain Kendall from the bridge.

"Kendall, we have been tricked!" he said tensely, as the yacht's commander joined him on deck by the rail. "There's foul play somewhere! The man in the cabin is not Charlebois!"

"What's that!" exclaimed the captain sharply. "Not Charlebois! What do you mean? Are you crazy?"

"No," said Stranway. "I wish to Heaven I were—in this particular instance! It's a case of more or less clever impersonation. The man is not Charlebois."

"He isn't, eh? Well, then, God help him! We'll get some of the hands, and——"

"No—wait!" interposed Stranway. "First of all, where are we bound for?"

Captain Kendall pointed ahead through the darkness.

"A bit of an island out there that we're close aboard of now," he answered. "There's a summer sanatorium of some sort on it."

"I thought so!" Stranway nodded quickly. "Now, who gave you orders to expect Charlebois and a friend aboard, and who gave you directions where to——"

"I did!" The answer came in a low voice from behind them.

Both men whirled around. It was the Orchid.

Instantly, impulsively, Stranway stepped toward her —and suddenly found his voice out of control.

"I—you," he stammered, "I——"

She put out a hand arrestingly, and for a moment it lay upon his sleeve.

"Let me speak!" she said breathlessly. "And please do not interrupt. There are things that you both must know, and I dare not stay here more than a minute or so. As part of the present plan, I was an inmate of Doctor Meers' sanatorium sometime ago. I won his confidence. He believes that I have turned against Charlebois because I have been well paid by him to do it, and——"

"But"—Stranway, though his eyes were eagerly drinking in her every feature, had somewhat regained his composure—"how did he know you had anything to do with Charlebois?"

"Please—oh, please, do not interrupt," she pleaded earnestly. "I must give you Charlebois' orders, and every second is priceless. If I am missed for even an instant it will be fatal. Everything that has happened has been planned by Charlebois, but I could

warn neither of you of the true state of affairs over the phone, and indeed I"—she flashed a sudden, wry little smile at Stranway—"even had to be abrupt with Mr. Stranway. Doctor Meers is a very suspicious man, and he was at my elbow when I telephoned you both. But I *did* warn you a few minutes ago, Mr. Stranway, to deny all knowledge of that paper, for Doctor Meers must be made to think that he is destroying all clues behind him. You will understand that later. The man who is impersonating Charlebois is no more than a vaudeville impersonator paid to play the part—he knows nothing. Doctor Meers will land alone at the island. I am to stay aboard as a protector to the pseudo-Charlebois—to *prevent* the deception from being discovered! You, Mr. Stranway, are to follow Doctor Meers. You are to take a couple of men with you, but you are not to act until the last moment. Let Doctor Meers play out his game, let him go as far as possible before you interfere. He will enter the sanatorium by the front door—you must go around to the back one, which you will find open. This gives directly on the diet kitchen. Leading from the diet kitchen, through a swinging door, is a short hall that opens on the main ward. The entrance end of the hall to the ward is closed only by a screen such as is used to surround a patient's bed—after that your own judgment must guide you. Tell me quickly now, have you understood? I have already been too long away—everything depends on preventing the slightest suspicion from arising in Doctor Meers' mind."

"Yes; I understand," Stranway answered. "But you——"

She was gone—running swiftly back along the deck.

For an instant Stranway stood staring after the

little retreating figure, but he made no effort to follow her. He was neither startled nor surprised at her abrupt departure; he was conscious, more than of anything else, of a feeling that there had come to be something inevitable, as it were, in the futile termination of these meetings between them—something that always, it seemed, must override and utterly ignore the personal equation. To-night, now, for instance—to have detained her, to have attempted it even, would not only have placed Charlebois' plans in jeopardy, but might very easily have put the Orchid herself in peril. He could no longer see her now along the deck, and, without comment, he turned to face Captain Kendall again.

The two men looked at each other grimly for a moment.

"This man Meers is a—devil—eh?" growled the yacht's commander, breaking the silence.

"From what I know of him, he is an inhuman fiend," Stranway replied, in a low, hard voice. "But I take it from what she said, or rather left unsaid, that Charlebois is safe, probably on the island, and is waiting there to stop Meers' deviltries once for all."

"I'd like to go with you, by George!" the captain rapped out suddenly. "But, of course, I can't! I'll see that you get two good men, though. We're pretty near in now. I'll have to attend to the landing." He wheeled, and began to mount the bridge ladder—and stopped. "Are you armed?" he demanded gruffly.

"I am always armed," Stranway answered quietly.

CHAPTER XVII

AS PER ACCOUNT RENDERED

THE next fifteen minutes passed for Stranway in a state of restless impatience. He knew much; but also knew little. Question after question crowded upon him as before. He could not answer them—nor would the pieces of the puzzle fit together in any way. And *suicide*—again and again, that single gruesome word, the entry in the Red Ledger, obtruded itself.

A steward came along the deck, and, hailing the bridge, delivered a message to the captain. The orders from the "saloon" were that no one was to be allowed ashore apart from Mr. Charlebois' guest, and that the yacht was to await that gentleman's return. They were docking at the end of what was evidently the private pier belonging to the sanatorium, as Captain Kendall briefly acknowledged the instructions.

A moment later, as the yacht was made fast, Doctor Hadley Meers appeared from the companionway, glanced up the deck to where, a few yards away, Stranway, leaning on the rail, was nonchalantly smoking a cigarette, then stepped across the gangway, and walked briskly shoreward along the wharf. A moment later again, as the doctor's form was lost in the darkness, the cigarette dropped from Stranway's hand with a little hiss into the water, two men came quietly to Stranway's side, and the three, leaving the yacht, followed Meers.

The wharf was perhaps a hundred feet in length,

and, reaching the shore, Stranway followed a driveway that led in through a thick grove of trees, until presently, some fifty yards away, as the driveway made a sharp turn, two or three lights, twinkling from the windows of what was obviously the sanatorium, came suddenly into view.

Stranway halted his men to listen. Meers' footsteps, crunching on what was presumably a gravel walk, came to them now distinctly. The next minute, they heard the man mount some steps, and, from the sound, cross a verandah; then a door opened and closed.

With his men behind him, and keeping to the border of the driveway to deaden the sound of their footsteps on the turf, Stranway broke into a run. It took him scarcely a minute to reach what was evidently, in the season, a large and well-kept lawn. He checked his pace here; and, proceeding more cautiously, crossed the lawn and passed around the side of the building, which he could now see was a large, spacious, and many-windowed wooden structure.

Once at the rear, he led the way unhesitatingly toward a low stoop which loomed up in the darkness, and, with his men still close behind him, went up the steps and tried the door. It was open, as the Orchid had said it would be.

At Stranway's whispered directions, and imitating his example, the others removed their shoes; and then, stepping noiselessly inside, Stranway's pocket flashlight came into play for an instant, located the swinging door across the room in which they found themselves—and went out. In another instant he had led the way into the hallway that the Orchid had described. Here, light coming from the farther end, he could see the screen to which she had referred; and

now he caught, too, the sound of a voice in a mingled snarl and sneer, which he recognized as that of Doctor Meers.

Silently the three men stole along the short hallway until within a few feet of the screen. Here, Stranway motioned his companions to take a position one on each side of the wall behind him, edged forward himself to the screen, and, finding it to be cloth-covered, quickly cut a slit in it with his penknife. He peered through the opening—and for a moment stood like a man dazed; then his eyes grew dark with passion and his hands clenched fiercely at his sides. What he had expected to see he could not have told in any tangible way: Charlebois, yes; but Charlebois the master; Charlebois, in whatever strange way the little old gentleman might have seen fit to bring it about, holding the whiphand; Charlebois, certainly —*but not like this!*

Before him was a large apartment that ran the width of the building—a sick ward, evidently somewhat dismantled now for the winter when it was not in use. Near the right-hand windows and quite close together were two single beds. Upon each of these lay a man bound and roped by many lashings that passed around and around their bodies and the beds themselves. One of the two, and it was only too grimly obvious that there was no impersonation here, was Charlebois; the other's identity Stranway could guess at well enough—Minter.

Standing before the beds was Doctor Hadley Meers; and beside Meers stood a short, gray-haired, roughly dressed man—the old servant Minter had referred to in his statement, undoubtedly.

Stranway's first impulse was to spring forward upon the two; and then the Orchid's words, "let him play

out his game," came to him, and he checked himself.

Meers was speaking.

"Well, Doctor Minter," he jeered, "I trust you are thoroughly pleased with the result of your—let us call it—original research work. I had the pleasure of reading enough of your conclusions to congratulate you on your discovery. You have—I am sure you will appreciate the inevitableness of it—very little longer to live under the circumstances, and if it will sweeten these last few minutes any to know it, I am glad to assure you that you are quite correct in your deductions. I only regret that time prevents my disposing of you by the same method you so meticulously described, and that in your case I shall have to resort to speedier, if somewhat cruder means."

"Ah!" Charlebois spoke suddenly. "You admit, then, that you murdered the Loud brothers by deliberately inoculating them with typhoid germs?"

Meers wheeled on Charlebois, and laughed gratingly:

"I'll get around to *you* in a moment! But, meanwhile, since you have chosen to interfere in what does not concern you, and will share what I have in store for Minter, I admit it quite freely."

"And this man"—Charlebois indicated the servant with a bob of his head—"does he die, too, that you make a confession in his presence?"

Again Meers laughed unpleasantly.

"Coming from you," he sneered, "I can well understand your question. If you were a little more careful about those who surround you, you would not be drawing your last few breaths at this moment. Don't worry yourself any on my behalf. Jacques and I understand each other, as you will learn to your cost.

I keep those who are faithful to me. He has been in my employ for twenty years."

"And he has been in mine"—Charlebois' tones rang suddenly tense and stern—"for *twenty-one!*" The corded ropes over the bed seemed to give way as if by magic. With a quick jerk, Charlebois was in an upright position, his hand leapt swift as thought from beneath the bedspread, and a revolver covered Doctor Hadley Meers.

With a sharp intake of breath, his blood tingling, Stranway watched the scene. Meers staggered back —the taunt, the sneer, the vindictive, malicious triumph was gone from him; there was only fear now in a face grown suddenly livid.

Charlebois' orders came crisp and sharp:

"Jacques, disarm him, and guard the door leading to the front hall! Minter, you would better take your place there, too, with Jacques."

He was obeyed on the instant. Minter, with as little difficulty as Charlebois had experienced, cast off the cords and rose from the bed. Jacques stepped coolly to the dazed and shaken man, felt quickly over the other's clothing, and, finding a revolver, transferred it to his own pocket.

Charlebois, too, now rose, and advanced a step toward Meers; and then, rapidly, in cold, unemotional tones, he began to speak:

"Twenty-one years—I have watched you all that time—waiting until by some act or deed of your own volition, by your own inherent evil nature, you would bring your own destruction upon yourself, and I should pay the debt I owe you. It has been a long time in coming, that hour of settlement—but it has come now! Two lives have gone out at your hands. I could not save them, because I had no slightest sus-

picion of your purpose, but you shall answer for them before the law and before your God. Jacques, set as jailor by you over Minter, found Minter's statement, made himself known to Minter, and sent the statement to me. A certain woman—another of the *faithless* ones who surround me—whom you know through her having been an inmate here, came to you and told you that I, her employer—you understood that her occupation was that of confidential secretary to some one—had received a document under strange circumstances, the tenor of which she did not know. She told you that a servant of mine, out on a day's boating holiday on the Sound, had landed at an island; that the envelope had been thrown to him from the window of a large house, the only one on the island; that a man from the window had begged him to deliver it in all haste to the police, instead of which he had brought it first to me; that I at once left my house after locking the document in the safe and telling her that I would be away for a day, during which her services would not be required; that she had seen the signature to the paper, Doctor Minter's, and knowing that he was your associate, she had come to you without an instant's delay to tell you what had happened.

"It was very plausible, was it not? You had no reason to suspect anything. I did not intend that you should. The inference was plain. Your secret was out—Minter knew it—and it was now known to another besides Minter. Also the inference was that I had gone to the island—to Minter. This inference became a certainty when Jacques went to the mainland and telephoned you that I was here. We were both then, the only two men who knew of your crime —except that scoundrel nephew, who will be met by an officer from Scotland Yard when he lands at South-

ampton the day after to-morrow—practically within your power. You instructed Jacques to manage in some way to drug us, and then to make us prisoners and hold us until you were ready to deal with us finally. My continued absence—and I permitted no news of my whereabouts to escape, despite the anxiety I knew it was occasioning—was to substantiate in your mind, beyond the possibility of any doubt, Jacques' assurance to you that he had succeeded.

"There remained, then, only Minter's statement. Once you had that, the game was all in your own hands. Bue you must have that *first*—make sure of that, cover your trail behind you as you went along, before you disposed of us. The plan you adopted to obtain the statement was originated by me, and 'suggested' to you by the same young woman as before. You seized upon it eagerly, did you not, since it even provided you with an alibi for yourself when the time came to get rid of Minter and myself? I believe from your instructions to Jacques that it was your humane intention to leave us here, bound, and with a time-fuse connected to the pile of combustibles you ordered him to gather together in the cellar, so that, say, at four o'clock in the morning, long enough after your visit to prevent any suspicion attaching itself to you, the sanatorium would burn to the ground—and Minter and I would burn with it. That Minter, who had laboratory business here, might perish, would, it is quite evident, not seem suspiciously strange; but your visit here in my yacht in the face of my disappearance was quite another matter. In reality, though, or so it seemed to you, it made the very point in your favor that you required, for every man aboard the yacht would testify that I, Henri Raoul Charlebois had returned to New York—and another disappear-

ance following the first one concerned you not a whit, so that your hands appeared to be unquestionably clean.

"You wonder why I came here, why I lured you here, why I did not at once on receipt of Minter's statement, turn to the police, cause your arrest without more ado, and let the law deal with you alone. I will tell you why: I was afraid you might even then escape the penalty you deserve. I did not dare depend on Minter's statement alone to assure your conviction without corroborative evidence to back it up, and I gave you credit for having destroyed the hypodermic syringe and all results of his tests. It was necessary that you should admit your guilt before witnesses. But you would only do that when you were absolutely sure you were safe, when the statement was destroyed, and when the only ones who knew of your guilt were in your power. But you would do it then, and do it in a taunting, gloating way—all men of your stamp do! You did it more readily than I anticipated, and——"

"You, in God's name, who are you?" The words, in a wild cry, burst from Meers' twitching lips. His eyes, full of haunting terror, swept once around the room, then came back, as if fascinated, to rivet themselves on Charlebois.

"I am the man," Charlebois answered in the same stern tones, "that once you tempted to face his Maker with his own blood upon his hands; the man that, in his despair and misery, you, with your brutal, inhuman cynicism, almost succeeded in taunting to his death, to *suicide*. You have forgotten the occasion, perhaps? I will try to recall it to your memory. It is long ago, long before the past twenty years during which I have watched you. It was an afternoon on the Battery. You sat down on a bench beside a man who was

miserably clothed. He made no advances to you; but you, for your amusement, began to draw him out. Believing that sympathy prompted you, he told you his story, told you of his illness, his inability to work —and perhaps then he hoped, and God knows no human being ever needed it more desperately or deserved it more, that you would give him a little help, or at least say a kindly word to cheer him on, for, in his despair, there seemed nothing left in life for him that afternoon. Do you begin to recall the scene? Do you remember your words when you had heard his story and rose callously to go away? They ate into his soul—*I* remember them—I am that man. 'There are too many like you,' you said. 'You are a putrid lot, running sores on the face of the earth, cringing, whining lepers, worthless to yourselves and to everybody else—it would be a boon to society if you would do away with yourself. If you're as miserable as you say you are, you ought to be glad enough to do it—only you are all cowards. I advise you to try it to-night. Jump off there'—you pointed to the river—'it is the only commendable and decent act you'll ever perform.' That night"—a spasm crossed Charlebois' features, and his voice dropped into a low, tense whisper—"that night I was very near my death."

It was very still in the room as Charlebois ceased speaking, so still that the pounding of his own heart seemed audible to Stranway, as he watched the scene before him. Near the door, Minter and Jacques were strained a little forward, still in the intent attitude they had assumed while hanging on Charlebois' words. In the center of the room, Meers' form swayed with a curious jerky movement backward and forward; the gray in his face had deepened to a still more sickly

pallor; his eyes, wide, haunted, were again sweeping the room in every direction, only to fix at every alternate second upon Charlebois' grave face, and upon the revolver in Charlebois' hand. Suddenly this changed. Startling, discordant, jarring, a peal of unnatural laughter came from the wretched man's lips.

"Suicide, eh?" he cried. "Did I advise that? Ha, ha! Well, it was good advice; I advise it yet—and my own advice is good enough for me, good enough for——"

"Stop him!" Charlebois cried out sharply, as he made a sudden rush toward the other.

With a shove, Stranway sent the screen crashing to the floor, and leapt forward; from the other side of the room, Minter and Jacques sprang for Meers—all of them too late. With a movement too swift for any intervention, Meers' hand had shot to his pocket, whipped out a vial and carried it to his lips, and even as the others reached him, the vial tinkled into splinters at their feet, the man reeled into Doctor Minter's arms—and a strong, penetrating odor resembling that of peach-blossoms seemed suddenly to permeate the room.

Minter laid Meers down, and for a minute or two worked over him, then he looked up and shook his head.

"Hydrocyanic acid," he said tersely.

Doctor Hadley Meers was dead.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ART OF PIQUET

ONE of those long intervals that Stranway had come to term "comparative tranquillity" had passed since the night at Doctor Meers' Sanatorium—not that Dominic Court in the meanwhile had been void of activity, for on the contrary, many entries in the Red Ledger had been balanced during that time, but the "payments" had been made at a distance, some of them even abroad, and at none of them had the little old gentleman or Stranway been present in person.

And now it was early afternoon in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court, and that "comparative tranquillity" was obviously at an end, for, during the last fifteen minutes, Stranway had been listening to instructions from Charlebois which within the next few hours, he knew, would plunge him headlong into "active service" again. From the bookshelf, he had just pulled down a volume indicated by the little old gentleman, and now, turning the pages rapidly to the reference asked for, he glanced inquiringly across the room to where Charlebois sat at the antique mahogany desk with the Red Ledger open before him.

"Well?" said the little old gentleman briskly. "What do you find?"

Stranway began to read from the book in his hand:

"'De Moreau, Leopold Pascal Joseph Emile—Count; sixth of his line; direct descendant——'"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Charlebois, with a jerk of

his head that set the tassel bobbing on his red skull-cap. "Of course! The young man is certainly possessed of a pedigree. It recites it all, does it not, like a chapter in Genesis? Well, then, since we have been over all our records together, you know all there is to know about Count Leopold Pascal Emile De Moreau. Is it not so?"

Stranway nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said.

For a moment Charlebois was silent, then he laid his hand on the open page of the Ledger.

"Little Marjorie Dorothy Blaine—and now the little girl has grown to womanhood! Wonderful, wonderful!" he said softly. "The account goes back to the time when she was a very little tot of four or five, my boy, and I owe her more, perhaps, than to all the rest of those whose names are here. I have never seen her in all these years, but"—he waved toward the huge filing cabinet beside the safe—"I have watched over her. She has grown to be a very beautiful woman, rich, charming, well educated. I have never had an opportunity to do her a service commensurate with my debt. She has never wanted anything until now—and now she wants to marry Count De Moreau, at whom all the wealthy New York families with eligible daughters are setting their caps while they bid frantically against each other for the prize." Charlebois paused and smiled quizzically. "Human nature is strangely curious and complex and mystifying, isn't it? What a diversity of longings, tastes, ambitions and desires! I set my heart upon one thing, you upon another, and to some in this democratic land of ours a title is the *summum bonum* of all earthly happiness." Charlebois closed the Red Ledger suddenly and stood up. "Marjorie Blaine

wants to be the Countess De Moreau—well, well, we must pay our debt, and it seems now that the time has arrived. Well, my boy, I think there is nothing further to be said—everything is quite understood?"

"Quite," said Stranway.

"Money?" inquired Charlebois. "You have taken plenty of money? The Count, I fear, is—er—perhaps embarrassed in that respect, and you play a very poor hand at piquet—very poor."

"Wretched," admitted Stranway, with a comical air of despair.

The old gentleman's face softened and he came suddenly to Stranway, laying his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Ah, my boy," he said, "I do not know what I should do without you. All of those who surround me are faithful, and I would trust them all with my life as I do day after day, but you"—his voice broke a little—"it is, indeed, as though God had given me a son, and——" He stopped, then pushed Stranway gently toward the door. "No, no!" he smiled, as Stranway was about to speak. "It is not necessary. I know what is in your heart, too. I read it long ago. And now you have no time to lose. You will be expected within the next hour or so." He was still pushing Stranway toward the door. "Go now—hurry, my boy!"

Stranway's destination was the Long Island estate of Henry Blaine, the multi-millionaire—and at five o'clock that afternoon he was idly watching a game of cards in the so-called gun-room of Mr. Blaine's palatial mansion. He had met Mrs. Blaine, Mr. Blaine, Marjorie Blaine, a dozen ladies, a dozen men—and the Count De Moreau. He was, in short, an integral part of a fashionable house party, and one of the in-

vited guests. Stranway smiled a little to himself as the origin of the invitation he had received intruded itself now suddenly upon his mind. He had not known the Blaines, the Blaines had not known him; but, none the less, an invitation had reached him three days before. He remembered the half amused, half whimsical light in Charlebois' eyes when it had arrived. "They had heard"—so Mrs. Blaine wrote—"from their very dear friend, Mr. Justin Overholt of Chicago, that he (Stranway) was visiting New York, and he must be sure and come to them in Long Island—just a little house party—and be sure and come not later than Tuesday as they were giving a small ball that evening in honor of Count De Moreau, etc., etc." Stranway's smile broadened into one quite natural as the man behind whose chair he was standing suddenly screwed around, held up his hand, exhibited a poverty-stricken pair of deuces, and raked in a not immodest pot. They were playing poker, a half dozen of his fellow guests, and Stranway had politely refused to join the circle, laughingly declaring that a seventh hand was little less than sacrilege to the national game and that he would much prefer to look on.

"Never *can* get a bet when I have anything!" complained the owner of the deuces. "You fellows are misers. Hello, here's the Count! What's the matter, Count? You look sad!"

A short, slim, dapper little man, immaculately dressed, his hair worn short and pompadour fashion, his small black mustache waxed and pointed, stood in the doorway.

"What desolation!" The Count shrugged his shoulders, and flung out his hands in a gesture of mock despair. "It is but five o'clock, and the ladies are already gone to their *toilettes* for the evening. I

fall over servants making their preparations everywhere——"

"That's why we took refuge here," laughed one of the men. "Better sit in till dinner."

"And," resumed the Count, as though no interruption had taken place, "I come to the gun-room and I find—poker! What desolation!" He crossed the room, and joined Stranway beside the table. "Poker! Always poker! Now, écarté—piquet—I am sure you agree with me, Mr. Stranway, since you are not playing?"

Stranway laughed. "Well, I don't know, Count. I've nothing against poker, though I confess I like piquet. Écarté I don't care for."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Count delightedly. "You play piquet! Adorable! We will play, Mr. Stranway."

The men at the table were chaffing now:

"Look out for him, Mr. Stranway. . . . Keep him down to a mill a point. . . . There's a fresh pack on the mantel over there. . . . Better change your mind and sit in here. . . ."

"Oh, *là là,* what a babel!" protested the Count, stuffing his fingers into his ears. "Here, Mr. Stranway"—he pulled out a table in the corner—"let us get as far away from them as possible."

And Stranway, laughing outright, took his place opposite the Count.

Count De Moreau split the new pack, handed half to Stranway, and began to discard up to the sevens.

"What delight!" said he vivaciously. "And the point, Mr. Stranway—for what shall we play?"

"Anything you like, Count," responded Stranway easily. "If a dollar"—casually—"interests you—say, a dollar a point."

Stranway's eyes apparently were on the cards in his

hand, but the Count's quick start, almost imperceptible and well controlled though it was, did not escape him. There was no hesitation, however, in the Count's reply—it came on the instant:

"*Mais certainement,* Mr. Stranway—that is but worthy of the king of games! You will cut? Ah! The deal is yours."

They played through the first *partie*—six hands—and during that half-hour's play the Count paid very strict attention to his game. More than once Stranway caught a furtive, puzzled, speculative glance from the other's restless black eyes, and translated it with a grim inward chuckle—the Count was evidently trying to decide whether he was playing with a young spendthrift American millionaire, or an adversary who was leading him on only to open finally with masked batteries and overwhelm him. In the last hand Stranway, however, removed the Count's suspense. A blunder cost Stranway a rubicon. Count De Moreau credited himself with their combined scores, added a hundred—and Stranway was on the wrong side of two hundred and ninety-four dollars.

After that Stranway lost steadily and heavily—with the most imperturbable good humor. The Count, vivacious again, laughed and chatted gaily. They played three more *parties,* and were in the midst of another when the dressing bell rang. Presently the poker party broke up and strolled over to Stranway and the Count.

"Well, how goes it?" inquired Marland, the man of the two deuces.

Stranway looked up with a laugh.

"By Jove!" he said. "It's nip and tuck, regular see-saw! This game will settle it."

Count De Moreau shot him a grateful glance.

"Well, the dressing bell's gone," advised Marland. "You'd better hurry."

"Right!" said Stranway pleasantly, and resumed his play.

One by one the others sauntered out of the gun-room. And then, on the last hand, another blunder resulted in a rubicon against Stranway—he owed Count De Moreau exactly one thousand and sixty-eight dollars.

The Count spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"What *diable* luck you have had!" he exclaimed.

Stranway smiled, as he produced his pocketbook.

"Nonsense!" he said. "I'm only lending you this, Count. Just wait until I get my revenge!"

"Ah! Charming!" cried the Count effusively. "You shall have it, *mon cher* Stranway!"

Stranway unostentatiously permitted the other to obtain a rather comprehensive view of the interior of his pocketbook. It was filled with crisp new bills, and none of a lower denomination than a hundred dollars. He handed the Count three bills—two for five hundred, and one for a hundred dollars.

The Count, with a bow, placed the money in his pocket.

"My *porte-monnaie* is in my room, Mr. Stranway," he explained. "I will give you the change upstairs."

"Be sure you don't forget it," laughed Stranway, replacing his pocketbook. "Thirty-two dollars, Count!" He got up from his seat. "Well, I guess we'd better take Marland's advice and hurry."

The Count slipped his arm through Stranway's as they left the room—and arm in arm they traversed the intervening rooms and halls, and, laughing and joking, mounted the broad central staircase together.

As they reached the landing, Stranway, whose at-

tention had been given to a story that the Count was relating with all the address of a born *raconteur,* mechanically stepped a little to one side to allow passageway, as the faint rustle of a dress caught his ear; but mechanically, too, he lifted his eyes—and the next instant, in spite of himself, he caught his breath.

Coming toward them along the hall, was the Orchid! She looked full into Stranway's face without a trace of recognition, favored the Count with the tiniest of smiles—and passed on. Stranway, to save his soul, could not help it—he stared after her.

"Ah!" whispered the Count, pressing Stranway's arm playfully. "Divine, eh, my boy?" She is *coiffeuse* to Miss Blaine. But, oh, *là là,* very cold—beware!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROAD THROUGH THE WOODS

IN his room, Stranway peremptorily dismissed the valet, who, having laid out his clothes, was waiting for him—and sat down on the edge of the bed. The Orchid! The intervals between their meetings were far enough apart, Heaven knew, without being accompanied ever and always by impossible conditions that brushed any initiative on his part in respect of her incontinently aside! And now, for the first time since that night on Charlebois' yacht, he had just seen her again—and exactly the same thing had happened. Yes, and it was strange, too, about that night! He had not been able to find her on the yacht on the way back—and *nobody* knew where she was! What did it all mean, anyway? Was it the Orchid herself, after all, and in spite of the fact that he had bolstered himself up with the belief on more than one occasion that she was not by any means indifferent to his existence, who saw to it that these meetings left him no loophole to advance his cause? —or was it Charlebois?—or was it both of them in connivance together? And why? She wasn't playing with him. She wasn't the kind of woman who did that sort of thing. He was prepared to stake his life on that. And yet she must know what she had come to mean to him!

And then, suddenly, Stranway laughed not altogether mirthfully, and, jumping to his feet, began hurriedly to change into his evening clothes. Why

should she know, how could she know—she had jolly well seen to it that he had never had a word with her in private! And yet—and yet—once or twice there *had* been that little telltale tinge of color in her cheeks which had seemed so surely to indicate a different story!

Stranway wrenched somewhat savagely at his collar. Charlebois had told him he would have "inside assistance" here to-night—why hadn't Charlebois said it would be the Orchid? Well, all right! Let it go at that! Since it was the Orchid who was working here with him, it was absolutely certain that he would see her again before the night was out; it was essential to the plans outlined by Charlebois that he should, and—he smiled now in a sudden grim and determined way—in that case, with that fact in his possession, he was armed with an opportunity he had never had before. Here was a chance to turn the tables, wasn't it? This time *he* would have something to do with the *mise en scène* of the next meeting!

He was just giving his tie its final twist, when a knock sounded at his door, and the Count, as debonair and correct as the latest fashion plate, entered.

"I do not intrude?" he smiled. "It is to pay that little balance."

Stranway's pocketbook lay upon the dresser. He took the money the Count extended, placed it on top of the pile of banknotes inside his pocketbook, closed the pocketbook again, and jocularly slapped the Count on the shoulder with it.

"What a weight off my mind, Count!" he laughed—and slipped the pocketbook into the inside pocket of his dress coat. "Well, shall we go down?"

"Just a minute," said the Count; "just a little minute." He pulled at his mustache, hesitated; then,

impulsively: "You are a very good fellow, Stranway, a—what you call—good sport. You run a car, eh?"

"Of course," said Stranway. "Why?"

"Splendid!" exclaimed the Count. He put both hands on Stranway's shoulders, and pushed him into a chair. *"Mon Dieu,* my dear boy, then I conscript you!"

"I'm willing," laughed Stranway again. "What's the game?"

"Ah!" cried the Count. "Listen! It is a lark, as you say; and Miss Blaine is a good sport, too. After dinner we are to steal away for a little ride in the moonlight, just a little ride, and be back before the outside guests arrive and the dancing begins."

"Count! Count!" chided Stranway, shaking his head in mock reproof. "So! And where do I come in?"

The Count laid his forefinger waggishly along the side of his nose.

"Well, you see," he explained, "I intended to be chauffeur myself, but in the tonneau——"

"It would be much more conducive to a satisfactory tête-à-tête," completed Stranway, with a grin. "And with a circumspect, trustworthy fellow for a chauffeur nothing is left to be desired. Oh, Count, Count!"

"Then, you——"

"Why, of course, I will," cut in Stranway heartily. "I'll see you through, my boy, and here's my hand on it."

The Count grasped Stranway's hand and shook it effusively.

"You are, Stranway, you are—a prince!" he cried delightedly. "Right after dinner—I had a car left by the lodge gates, you understand?"

Stranway got up from his chair.

"Right you are!" he agreed cheerily. "I'm with you, Count! Depend on me! But we'd better hurry down now, hadn't we, or we'll be late?"

They crossed the hall and began to descend the stairs. Halfway down Stranway halted suddenly.

"Count, you are to blame," he complained. "My handkerchief—just a second!"

He turned, ran lightly up the stairs, entered his room, took out his pocketbook, slipped it into his dress-suit case, locked the case, whipped a handkerchief from his pocket, and with it in his hand hurried back to the waiting Count.

"All right," he said. "Sorry to keep you. *En avant!*"

The dinner was a very laborious affair—to Stranway. Mr. Blaine's round, somewhat fatuous countenance beamed with a perpetual smile from one end of the table; from the other, through a profusion of hothouse decorations, Mrs. Blaine's beamed with the same smile. Stranway's vis-à-vis was Marjorie Blaine—of course, with the Count beside her. A beautiful girl, Charlebois had called her—and she was, Stranway decided. With her frank blue eyes, her golden hair, a face of perfect oval contour, and with a personality as vivacious and as full of life and fire as the stones of the magnificent diamond necklace that flashed on the white, bare throat, she was a glorious type of young American womanhood.

In lulls between the heavy battery-play of courses, a Miss Harcourt, seated at Stranway's side, bombarded him with a gatling-like rapid fire of small talk.

"Wasn't Marjorie just perfectly lovely to-night? . . . And wasn't the necklace simply divine? . . . Mr. Blaine had paid ninety thousand dollars

for it in Paris—*in Paris*—just think of the duty on top of that! . . . Naturally, it was worn only on occasions of state—in honor of the Count to-night, of course. . . . Everybody was sure it was going to be a match—wasn't it just too delightful for anything . . .?"

Finally Mrs. Blaine gave the signal. The ladies rose and left the room—and half an hour later, Stranway subserviently closed the tonneau door of a big touring car, and with exaggerated gravity touched an old slouch outing hat that he had picked up on the way out of the house.

"Beg pardon, sir; which way, sir?" he inquired.

Marjorie Blaine's laugh rippled out at him.

"You're just too absurd, Mr. Stranway, with those goggles, and a dress suit, and that hat—I wish you could see yourself!"

"Yes'm," said Stranway humbly.

"Let's take that road we were riding on the day before yesterday," suggested the Count.

"The old turnpike?" said Marjorie Blaine. "All right—let's! Only we mustn't go far. We're three very naughty children to play truant this way, and we must be back before the people begin to arrive. Straight ahead, Mr. Stranway, and take the first turn to the right about a quarter of a mile down the road —we'll tell you when you get to it."

"Yes'm," said Stranway, and, touching his hat again, took his seat at the wheel.

He drove for some distance along the main road, and then, as they called out to him, he took a turning to the right which led in through what appeared to be a heavily-wooded bit of country. And now he slowed a little, for the turnpike, as Marjorie Blaine called it, and which he was now presumably following,

required more cautious driving. It was intensely dark, a lonely stretch of road in none too good repair, and it turned and twisted constantly; but it was, apparently, eminently satisfactory to Marjorie Blaine and the Count, for he could hear them laughing and talking behind him.

But Stranway's attention was soon wholly devoted to the road, for it became worse and worse, until, after they had covered perhaps a mile, he suddenly applied the brakes as, on rounding a turn, a red light showed a few yards ahead.

"What is it, Mr. Stranway?" called Marjorie Blaine quickly.

Stranway turned in his seat as the car stopped.

"They're repairing the road, I'd say at a guess," he laughed. "Anyway, it most certainly needs——"

"Get down out of that!" snarled a voice. "And youse two behind, climb out—and do it quick!"

The red light had vanished. Two dark forms were standing by the side of the car—and Stranway found himself blinking into the ugly little circle of a revolver muzzle.

"Come on, now! Get a move on!" prodded the voice. "Get down!"

Stranway obeyed—there was nothing else to do. Marjorie Blaine, after one startled cry, became quiet; and the Count, gesticulating fiercely, and snapping furiously in an excited and utterly unintelligible mixture of French and English at their captors, helped her from the car.

"Stand in a line, and youse two coves put yer hands up!" was the next order. "Now, Bill, go through 'em!"

Both men, Stranway saw, wore masks; and now, while one of them stood guard with a levelled re-

volver, the other deftly went through the Count's pockets. The result apparently was far from being remunerative. The man cursed as he came to Stranway.

"I never carry anything in my evening clothes, either," explained Stranway politely. "There's really no use in——"

"Youse keep yer hands up, and yer mouth buttoned!" growled the man.

He turned Stranway's pockets inside out. There was a match box, a cigarette case, a silver pencil, a handkerchief—nothing else.

"Hell!" swore the fellow in profound disgust. "For high-toned guys youse're thin picking, youse are! Here's hoping, lady, youse ain't left all yer jewels at home, 'cause there's an ante needed blamed bad in the pot."

With a cry, Marjorie Blaine started back and drew her cloak close around her. The man pulled it roughly away. The necklace gleamed at her throat.

"Ha! Sparklers, eh?" croaked the fellow. "Give 'em to me!"

The Count made a sudden movement toward the girl—but came to a halt with equal abruptness as the man with the revolver spoke.

"Try that, and I'll drop youse!" the man flung out savagely. "And I've a mind to give youse a tap on the head that'll put youse to sleep anyway—see!"

"My God, Stranway," groaned the Count, "this is——"

"Close yer face, youse!" commanded the one called Bill. "Now then, Miss, will youse take it off that pretty neck yerself, or d'youse want me—ah, I thought that'd bring youse to time." He pocketed the necklace. "Anything else?" He opened her cloak.

"Rings?" He made her hold out her hands for inspection. "Nix, eh? Well, I guess we ain't done so bad. Now then, youse"—coming to Stranway—"youse put yer hands together behind yer back." He took out a piece of cord from his pocket, quickly fastened Stranway's wrists, then tied them to the front wheel of the car. This done, he performed a like office for the Count at the rear wheel. "We ain't taking no chances, gents," he announced. "By the time the lady gets youse untied youse can follow if youse like—all we asks is a fair start. Good-night to youse, gents, and likewise the lady—ta ta!"

And the two had darted across the road and disappeared in the woods.

It took Marjorie Blaine a good five minutes to release the Count, and the Count, sputtering and raving insanely, quite as long to set Stranway free—but it took Stranway considerably less than half the time it had taken him on his outward journey to reach the house again.

Here, in the library, that they gained without attracting attention, and to which Mr. and Mrs. Blaine were hastily summoned, Mrs. Blaine, at the tale, promptly succumbed on the couch, while Mr. Blaine's flabby face went a sickly white as he paced the room helplessly. Marjorie Blaine, very pale, but, with the exception of Stranway, the coolest person in the room, bent over her mother.

The Count was still wildly excited.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed. "Let us act! Let us do something! The police! The police!"

"Yes, yes; the police," echoed Mr. Blaine, suddenly inspired by the idea. He rushed toward the telephone.

"Just a minute," interposed Stranway gravely. "It seems to me that the first consideration is yourselves. If you telephone to headquarters you'll wake up in the morning to find that you are the objects of notoriety in the shape of scare-heads in every paper in the country."

"Yes," echoed Mr. Blaine again. "Yes; that is so. We don't want anything like that."

"And then, too, I imagine," said Stranway, "you'll want to keep the affair from your guests to-night. They are already beginning to arrive for the ball, and——"

"Mr. Stranway is quite right!" Mrs. Blaine, reviving, sat up; her instinct of hostess for the moment predominant. "We must appear as though nothing had happened."

"But, mother," cried Marjorie, "how can we? Every one of the house party knows I was wearing the necklace. We're sure to be asked about it."

"You could make the excuse that the clasp was broken and you took it off, or something like that," suggested Stranway.

At Mrs. Blaine's words, the Count had hurried to her side, and dropped upon his knees.

"Oh, Madame, Madame, what can I say?" He spread out his hands imploringly. "It is my fault! I am desolated!"

Mrs. Blaine forced a smile—the Count De Moreau was still the very eligible Count De Moreau, for all the theft of a necklace.

"I can hardly be angry with you, Count, for what was no more than a young peoples' escapade," she said. "It was foolish of you all—but I have been young myself."

"Oh, Madame," murmured the Count gratefully, "you overwhelm me."

"Forgive me," said Stranway; "I don't want to appear to assume the scepter, but I am afraid you will begin to be missed. If Mr. Blaine"—he turned to the millionaire—"is willing to place the matter in the hands of a private detective agency, and so avoid unpleasant notoriety, and will permit me to do so, I'll arrange all details while you go to your guests. It will hardly be noticed that I am not dancing."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Blaine, with very evident relief at this solution. "Yes; just the thing! Do so, Stranway; do so, will you? I must confess I'm all flustered up. Come then, my dear!" He offered his arm to his wife.

"But we can hardly impose on Mr. Stranway to that extent"—Mrs. Blaine hesitated at the door, as Marjorie and the Count passed out.

"I am only too glad there is something that I may possibly be able to do," said Stranway quietly. "Like the Count, I cannot forget that I was a party to the escapade."

"Give them carte-blanche," said Mr. Blaine as a parting word. "Tell them expense doesn't figure, Stranway."

"All right," said Stranway, "I understand."

The door closed, leaving him alone. Stranway's hand went into his pocket—and then he smiled as he remembered that his cigarettes were gone. His eyes fell upon some, however, on the table, and, helping himself, he crossed the room to the little desk in the corner where the telephone stood, sat down in the comfortable lounging chair before it, drew the instrument to an ostentatiously convenient position in front of him—and leisurely lighted his cigarette.

CHAPTER XX

THE BARGAIN

HALF an hour passed, another half hour; twice Mr. Blaine had come in and asked hurried, anxious questions, and twice he had departed reassured by Stranway's answers. Stranway during this time had not moved from the lounging chair—the receiver had not been lifted from its hook.

But now he got up and began to pace the room a little nervously. Suddenly, he stopped near the door. A light step caught his ear. He had been expecting it, waiting for it, but, at the sound, he felt his pulse mount rapidly. The door opened. The Orchid came swiftly forward into the room. And then, before Stranway could speak, she produced a revolver from the folds of her dress and held it out to him.

"If you had your revolver with you out there," she said quickly, "it was, of course, taken from you; in any case, you have no time now to go to your room for one, so here is another, and——"

Stranway moved suddenly between her and the door.

"Thanks," he interrupted with a determined little smile, as he took the weapon from her hand; "but we can discuss 'business' a little later, can't we? You—you always *begin* that way—and after that I never have an earthly hope. We're going to work it the other way round this time, and begin by discussing you. You know, really, this simply can't, mustn't, and won't go on! I made up my mind when I met you in the hall before dinner that——"

The color was flooding into her cheeks and her eyes were half veiled by their long lashes, as she, in turn, broke in upon him hurriedly.

"Perhaps some day, perhaps some other time, I—I do not know"—her voice was low, with a tremor in it that for once, it seemed, she was unable to control—"but I do not think that even you would choose that it should be now. I came to tell you that he is in his room now—*and that he is not alone.* You know what that means, and for how long the one opportunity we have may last. You can reach his room by the back staircase. His door is unlocked—I took the key while you were out."

For an instant Stranway stared at her in hopeless chagrin, as the full significance of her words forced themselves upon him.

"Damn!" he ejaculated with whole-hearted fervency—and bolted from the room.

There *wasn't* any time! It was only too obvious to him that there had been no thought of subterfuge on her part. There wasn't time even to allow his personal feelings, his disappointment, the ironical repetition of circumstances which had upset his overconfident little scheme in respect of her, to linger for an instant now in his thoughts. Afterwards, yes—but for the moment, if ever in his life he needed a single mind and all his wits, it was now.

The library was at the rear of the house; the back staircase was just ahead of him. From the ballroom came the sound of music, the talk and laughter of many voices. No one was in sight. He took the stairs three at a time, reached the hall above, and ran along it swiftly, his steps noiseless on the rich, heavy carpets. But as he approached the end door on the right, he moved more cautiously—and reached the

door itself on tip-toe. Here he stooped for an instant to listen at the keyhole, then his face set grimly, and his fingers closed upon the door knob. With a sudden jerk he straightened up, flung open the door, sprang across the threshold with levelled revolver, and, shutting the door behind him, threw his back against it, as his eyes narrowed on the scene that confronted him.

Bending over the table near the center of the room stood the Count De Moreau. On the table itself, in a glittering heap, lay the diamond necklace. A little to one side stood another man, that Stranway knew to be the Count's valet.

For an instant there was silence; then a guttural oath from the valet, and a snarl like that of a trapped wolf from the Count, greeted Stranway.

Stranway smiled coldly.

"The game's up, Count!" he said evenly. "This time *you* lose the rubicon!"

The color came and went from the Count's face.

"You—Stranway!" he choked—and suddenly seized upon the necklace as though to hide it.

"No, you don't! *I'll* take care of that necklace!" Stranway snapped out, and jumped forward as he spoke—and the next instant, tripping on a rug, his revolver went spinning from his hand, and he pitched his length upon the floor. And then, in a flash, the valet was upon him, and, as Stranway felt the other's hands lock like a vise around his throat, he saw the Count stoop quickly for the revolver and snatch it up.

"All right, you can let him up now!" directed the Count hoarsely.

The valet, a big man with an ugly, murderous look, shook his head, and his grip tightened ominously.

"It's him, or us," he snarled. "We're caught, and our only chance is to croak him."

"Well, take your hands away from his throat for a minute anyway so that he can talk!" There was a nasty ring in the Count's low vicious tones. He came around the table and bent over Stranway, as the valet reluctantly loosened his hold. "Curse you for a meddling fool!" he rasped, his face contorted with fury. "You've ruined me! How did you find this out? Speak quick—I've no time to fool with you!"

Stranway fumbled at his collar where the valet's fingers had been.

"I thought I recognized the 'Bill' of the hold-up as your valet here," he answered in a strained voice.

"And you thought you'd play amateur detective, did you?" sneered the Count. "You fool, I'll teach you!"

"It looks as though I'd foozled it," said Stranway with a sickly smile.

"You didn't have that pocketbook of yours with you in the car," said the Count suddenly. "What did you do with it?"

"Why," Stranway answered readily, "I left it in my room that time I went back for my handkerchief. I thought it was foolish to carry it in a loose pocket like that if I was going motoring, and——"

"I tell you," broke in the valet, with a savage growl, "that our only chance is to croak him, if we don't want twenty years."

The Count laughed low, brutally.

"Do you hear that, Stranway? He's right; it's you, or us—and it's not going to be *us!*"

Stranway flung out his arm to ward off a blow that was suddenly aimed at him by the valet.

"Wait!" he pleaded quickly. "If you murder me

here in this room you'll be found out sooner or later, and you know it—but that won't do me any good. I —I'm not anxious to be murdered! You've got me at your mercy, and I'll tell you what I'll do. Let me go, and I give you my word of honor that I won't lay any information against you, provided you leave the United States by the first steamer and that you never come back to this country again—my life's more valuable to me than that necklace, but it's another thing if you have anything more to do with Miss Blaine."

"Ah! And if I refuse to leave?" The Count was mockingly polite.

"You wouldn't dare to stay in the country if you murdered me," returned Stranway judicially. "It's as broad as it is long."

"You are very ingenious!" jeered the Count. "But do you think I am a fool? The detectives you telephoned to—you've already told them all you know."

"I didn't telephone to a soul," said Stranway, making a wry face. "This wouldn't have happened if I had."

"What's that!" exclaimed the Count sharply; and then for the first time a smile, but a not over-pleasant one, flickered on his lips. "I see! You thought you wouldn't need them, eh?"

"Look here," said Stranway eagerly, "it's pretty nearly an even break. The sensible thing to do is to pool our interests. I *have* caught you, and the way out I'm suggesting is the only way—short of your alternative of murder. You were going back to New York to-morrow anyway, so your leaving here won't excite any suspicion. You can't go to-night, of course, for that would give it away; but you can go in the morning. I dare say you're pretty hard up or you wouldn't have done this, but you won a thousand from

me to-day so you've funds enough to get you and your accomplices out of the country without running the risk of trying to raise anything on the necklace on this side of the water. And as for me, to avoid any awkward questions to-night, I'll write a note, which you can give to Mr. Blaine yourself, saying that the detectives arrived, that I went out with them, and that I will report in the morning."

"And what guarantee have I that you will keep your mouth shut?" demanded the Count abruptly.

"My word," said Stranway simply. "And you know I'll keep it."

"I'm for takin' it," announced the valet suddenly. "Some gentlemen's words is good, an' I'll bank on this one's. It suits me. We get the sparklers, an' I ain't got no interest in the girl."

"Hold your tongue!" flared the Count furiously. He walked up and down the room several times, the scowl on his face deepening every instant, and finally halted over Stranway. "Curse you!" he burst out. "Well, get up and write that note!"

Stranway rose to his feet and went to the table. The Count tossed him a sheet of paper, which, after hastily scribbling a few lines upon it, Stranway handed back.

The Count read the note, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"Go!" he flung out in an ugly undertone—and added a vicious string of oaths.

At the door Stranway turned around.

"You understand the bargain?" he said—and suddenly his voice was level and deliberate. "If you ever come back to this country, if you ever make any advances to Miss Blaine—I speak. You understand about to-morrow morning—to save my own self I

must be here not later than eleven o'clock, and by that time you are to be gone."

He closed the door without waiting for any reply, went quickly to his own room, opened his dress-suit case, and, with a grim smile, secured his pocketbook; then he descended the back staircase, left the house by a rear door, and walked rapidly toward the stables and garage. A car was standing outside. Flint, who had driven him over that afternoon, sat in the driver's seat.

"Dominic Court, Flint!" he said tersely. "Keep your lights off, and get out of here without attracting any attention if you can possibly help it."

CHAPTER XXI

THE ACCRUED INTEREST

IT was exactly eleven o'clock the next morning as Stranway and Henri Raoul Charlebois were ushered into the library of the Blaine mansion; and but a moment later as Mr. and Mrs. Blaine and Marjorie joined them.

"Ah, Mr. Stranway," Mr. Blaine burst out, "the Count gave me your note, but we've been not a little alarmed and anxious at your protracted absence—didn't know what to make of it, though he assured us it was all right—on pins and needles, in fact! It's a relief, a very great relief, to see you. And this, I presume, is one of the detectives, Mr.——?"

"My name," said Charlebois briskly, "is of no consequence, no consequence whatever." He fixed each of the three members of the family in turn with his bright, steel-blue eyes, and waved his arm in a peremptory gesture as though to dismiss the subject. "You will pardon me if I appear to be abrupt, but I am an old man and habit is strong—it has never been my habit to beat about the bush. Let us proceed to business. The Count, I presume, has taken his departure?"

"Yes," said Mr. Blaine. "Much to our regret he——"

"It needn't be, it needn't be," broke in Charlebois sharply. "You are very fortunate. He is an utter rake and scoundrel."

A sharp cry came from Marjorie Blaine.

"How dare you!" exclaimed Mrs. Blaine indignantly.

"Yes; how dare you!" echoed Mr. Blaine. "How dare you! It's preposterous! I don't believe it."

Charlebois, apart from a whimsical smile, paid no attention.

"The Count De Moreau's record," he went on imperturbably, "left no doubt of it; but there was no one thing that could be concretely held against him—and much is smiled at, and forgiven, and accepted as a matter of course from our visiting foreigners of noble lineage. It was necessary, quite necessary, that there should be something concrete." He turned suddenly to Marjorie Blaine. "Ten days ago at a ball in New York you wore your necklace. The Count was enchanted with it, was he not? You told him it was only worn on special occasions, but that as a very great compliment to him you would wear it at your own ball to be given in his honor here last night. In fact, he made the request, I imagine?"

"Yes," gasped Marjorie, white-faced. "How did you know?"

"It is my business to know," said Charlebois quietly. "The Count was quite at the end of his resources. What he had managed to scrape together to bring over with him he lost in a gambling house in New York. He was quite penniless. In order to keep up appearances, to eventually contract a wealthy American marriage, he needed a large sum, and needed it desperately, so he planned the affair of last night with his specious rascal of a valet, who enlisted the services of a confederate."

"And do you mean to say that you knew what he intended to do, and didn't tell us?" roared Mr. Blaine. "Why didn't you tell us, eh; why didn't you tell us?"

"You would have received the information with the same incredulity that you did a moment ago when I told you he was a rake and a scoundrel," replied Charlebois calmly. "Furthermore, you would almost to a certainty have done something that would have put him on his guard, whereas it was my purpose to let him go on so that I might have a lever with which to drive him from the country and bring home to you a realization of his true character."

Mr. Blaine's face grew purple. He banged with his fist on the table.

"And in order to convince me that he is a thief," he sputtered in his wrath, "you let him get away with my daughter's necklace worth ninety thousand dollars—*ninety thousand dollars*—do you hear!"

A sudden change came over Charlebois. He straightened, and his face grew hard and cold.

"Sir," he said sternly, "do you count your daughter's happiness less than a few miserable baubles? You, Henry Blaine, are the type of wealthy American parent that I do not like—a name, a title, and you kow-tow like so many marionettes. It is pitiful! That is why I permitted the Count to get away with the necklace that he stole from Miss Marjorie last night—to save you from scandal, and myself, as an American, from being the laughing-stock of Europe. Yes, I permitted it; and I not only permitted it, but I was at considerable pains to see that he *did* get away in just exactly that manner. In fact, that was the most difficult phase of my problem, but Stranway here accomplished it, I believe, by tripping with cleverly simulated clumsiness upon a rug."

"Rug—Stranway," stuttered Mr. Blaine, "I——"

"When he confronted the Count in his room." Charlebois snapped out the meager information, as

though even that were a waste of time. "That's what Stranway was here for, though you may have thought otherwise."

"I don't understand!" Marjorie Blaine came suddenly forward. "How do you know all this? Why have you done what you have?"

The stern look vanished instantly from Charlebois' eyes, and a soft light took its place.

"It was a debt I owed," he said, smiling at her. "Listen! I will tell you about it. A great many years ago a very little girl was playing in a field, and she found a man—a very forlorn and ragged looking object I imagine he was too!—lying wearily on the grass. She asked the man if he was hungry, and he said he was. He hadn't had anything to eat for a very, very long time, you know. Then she wanted to know why he didn't buy something, and he said he hadn't any money. The little girl was carrying a toy bank and she gave the bank to the man." Charlebois' hand went into his pocket, and came out with a child's iron bank made in the shape of a safe.

Growing wonder was in Marjorie Blaine's face—she caught her hands quickly together.

"Then," continued Charlebois, "she showed the man how to shake the coins out of the little slot on top where they were only supposed to be deposited—I am afraid she burglarized her own safe pretty often, for she was very adept—like this!" Charlebois advanced to the table, turned the bank upside down, began to shake it, and one by one a number of coins rolled out on the table top.

"Oh!" cried Marjorie. "I remember! I remember!"

Mr. and Mrs. Blaine crowded abruptly forward.

"There were ninety-one cents in it," Charlebois went

on softly. "Two quarters, three dimes, two nickels, and a copper—just as there are here." He counted the money on the table. "There wasn't any key to the door of the bank, but the man had one made in after years." Charlebois' hand again went to his pocket and this time came out with a tiny key, which he fitted into the equally tiny keyhole. "And now" —he placed the safe in Marjorie's hands—"and now the man, who has become a very old man, gives back to the little girl, who has become a young woman, her safe and her ninety-one cents; and, for the accrued interest, the prospect, he hopes, of many happy years to come with some man who shall be really worthy of her, and——"

A startled exclamation burst suddenly from Marjorie's lips; a cry from her mother; another from Mr. Blaine. From the door of the little bank that Marjorie had opened, a gleaming stream of diamonds tumbled to the table.

"The necklace!" screamed Mrs. Blaine.

"Exactly," smiled Charlebois. "The necklace—that is what I was about to say."

"What—what does this mean?" stammered Mr. Blaine. "You said that the Count——"

"Quite so," interrupted Charlebois placidly. "There is no mystery about it. The Count has the necklace in his possession that he stole last night—but it is paste—a duplicate in design of this one that I took the precaution to have made. Your *coiffeuse,* Miss Marjorie, whose sudden leave-taking this morning I am sure you regret, substituted the paste necklace in your jewel-box almost as soon as you had taken it from the safe-deposit vault. This, the original, has been in my keeping ever since. That is all, quite all, except, of course, that you understand Mr.

Stranway did not communicate with any detectives, that nothing is known of this outside ourselves, that the Count's departure, being quite natural, will cause no talk, and"—Charlebois paused significantly—"and that he will never return to America."

Marjorie came to him crying softly, and put out her hands.

"He would have asked me to marry him, and I—and I—oh, how can I thank——"

"No! No-no-no!" cried Charlebois, suddenly quite helpless. "I cannot be thanked. I—I dislike thanks. There should be no thanks. It is a debt—a debt paid"—and clutching Stranway's arm he fairly ran from the room.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE DEBIT SIDE

IT was just past twilight three evenings later in the Red Room of 2½ Dominic Court. The Red Ledger—that singular volume which had never known its counterpart, and which in all human probability never would—lay with its three great hasps unlocked on the antique mahogany desk before Stranway and Henri Raoul Charlebois.

"Page two hundred and nine," said the little old gentleman, in a strangely musing way, as he turned the pages with quick, deft fingers. "Krinler—you know Krinler, do you not?"

Stranway shook his head a little doubtfully.

"I'm not sure that I do, at least in the sense you mean," he answered. "I am aware that the name of Krinler is there in the Ledger; but, as you know, it is one of those cases that you yourself set aside for your own individual attention, and, as such reports have always gone directly to you, I have never seen any one of them. The name itself, however, thanks to the newspapers, is of course more or less familiar to everybody as the name of the proprietor of that small wholesale dry-goods house, who, with some of the big departmental stores, has been the victim of those imported silk robberies that have been going on for the past year or so. Is it the same Krinler?"

"It is," said the little old gentleman softly. "And to-night, unless I am greatly mistaken, those robberies will come to an end."

"Then it's a case of two birds with one stone!" Stranway ejaculated impulsively. "That's good! Those robberies have baffled the police of two countries—France and our own."

The little old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

"I care nothing for that," he said crisply. "That is police work, not ours—we are not the police. I am concerned with it only so far as those whose names are written here"—his hand brushed the open page of the Red Ledger with a rapid motion—"are concerned with it; in this case—Krinler."

"Well, then, I'm glad on his account," Stranway returned heartily, "for he is certainly far less able to stand the losses than any of the big stores."

An affectionate, tolerant light crept into the little old gentleman's steel-blue eyes, died away, and a whimsical expression took its place.

"I think I have told you before, my boy," he said, "that your greatest fault, perhaps but a kindly one at worst, is that you sometimes allow your heart to rule your head—and I fear that your sympathy is too often wasted. In the present instance, before you are through with Krinler, you will, unless I am again mistaken, find him to be a malignant, tricky, and most dangerous character."

"What!" gasped Stranway in amazement. "You mean——"

"Yes," broke in the little old gentleman grimly, "I mean just that. I am afraid that you will have to play a very perilous part to-night, but I see no other way, and for your own protection, and that you may be thoroughly on your guard against him, you must know the man intimately for what he is. And I know of no better way of making you acquainted with him than to tell you how his name came to be written on

these pages. The debt, as do all these others here, goes back many years to that period of illness and destitution in my life of which I have spoken to you so often. Krinler is a man of fifty now; he was a young man of about twenty-six then, running a notorious saloon in a small mining town in one of the Western States. He had a hard name even then, and this even amongst a class of men whose very environment led them to be somewhat callous themselves where ethics were involved." Charlebois paused, looked at Stranway an instant—and the tassel on the red skull-cap seemed to bob in a sort of grim concordance, as he nodded his head slowly, while the wrinkles gathered ominously at the corners of his eyes. "I must not make a long story of it—it is the sequel to-night that interests us most. I was miserably clothed, and destitute in the uttermost sense of the word the night I stumbled into that little town and asked at the hotel for food and shelter. I say 'hotel' because that is what Krinler called the hell he ran; though, for that matter, everything of the sort was dignified by the name of 'hotel' in that section then. In what I believed was a big-hearted way that was cloaked by a rough, hard-tongued exterior, he took me in and gave me a shakedown for the night—and I was very grateful."

Again the little old gentleman paused, and a glint as of steel on flint showed for an instant in his eyes, while his hand, resting on the Red Ledger's page, curled into a clenched fist—then his shoulders moved with a curiously eloquent little lift, and he smiled impassively.

"The mail in that mountain region," he went on, "was carried between the towns in cruder fashion then than it is now—a rider slung the bags across his saddle

bow, and that was all there was to it, you understand? Late in the afternoon before I reached Krinler's, the mail-carrier, who had a very valuable registered package—a special consignment of banknotes, in fact, for the monthly pay roll of a mining company in the next town—was murdered about four miles away on the mountain trail, the bags slashed open, and the contents taken. The mail-carrier's horse evidently ran away before the murderer could secure him, and in the evening wandered into the town toward which his master had been heading. The animal was recognized, and a search party, which was immediately organized, started back along the trail between the two towns. At midnight they found the mail-carrier's body. He had been shot through the back of the head.

"Meanwhile, I had gone to sleep on the bunk Krinler had pointed out to me in the lean-to. At perhaps two o'clock in the morning, I was snatched roughly from the bunk, jerked to my feet, and thrown outside into the hands of an infuriated group of men who had gathered there. I cannot well describe my feelings. I do not think I am a coward—but I was afraid then. They were yelling out: 'Lynch him! Lynch him! Lynch the damned skunk!'—and they meant business. It was a moment before I could understand; and then I understood too well—that I had not a single chance. When the news of the murder reached Krinler's hotel, Krinler produced a letter—one that had obviously been in the mail-carrier's bags, since it did not bear the stamp of any receiving office—which he said he had found on the floor of the lean-to after I had turned in. That was enough to start the ball rolling. I was a stranger, and wholly disreputable in appearance at that. They rushed in upon me, as I have said. I had, of course,

taken off my coat before I lay down—and in the pockets were several bundles of letters from the mail bags, still tied in packages."

Stranway, his face suddenly hard, turned abruptly from the desk, drew up a chair opposite Charlebois, and sat down.

"I understand," he said in a strained way. "It was Krinler who——"

"Yes," said the little old gentleman, with a smile in which there was no mirth. "Yes; it was Krinler. He came into the lean-to after I was in the bunk for the purpose of putting the letters in my pockets, and explained his presence there to me—for I was awake, though it was too dark to see what he was about, and, besides, I of course suspected nothing—by saying that he had just come in to make sure I was all right. And he explained his visit to the others—accounting speciously for his having been in the lean-to at all, and having found the first letter on the floor—by saying he wanted to see that the 'hard-looking ticket' he had taken pity on wasn't up to any mischief, or hadn't made off with anything he could lay his hands upon. What chance had I?" Charlebois flung out his arms suddenly in a swift, impulsive gesture. "I hadn't the actual money, or any weapon with which I might have shot the mail-carrier, it is true—but both money and weapon might readily have been hidden. In any case, mob law, swayed by excitement and passion, seldom stops to reason. They would have lynched me on the spot—they nearly did—the rope was around my neck when the sheriff came upon the scene and rescued me."

"And then?" prompted Stranway tensely, as the little old gentleman paused once more.

Charlebois smiled whimsically.

"I am not an advocate of over indulgence in 'red-

eye,' as they called their liquor out there," he said quaintly, "but nevertheless, strange as it may seem, that was what saved my life that night. The sheriff locked me up in a shack and placed a man on guard over it. One of the miners, who had been drinking heavily all through the evening in Krinler's place, became imbued in maudlin fashion with the idea that his sense of fair play was outraged in that a whole town should pit itself against one man—and he unwittingly helped me to escape. I got through a small window at the back of the shack, while he was quarrelling so noisily with the guard in front that he raised enough disturbance to drown out any sound I made within. That is the story, my boy. The details of the days and nights of hunted horror before I finally made my ultimate escape from that section of the country can wait for another time; we must give our attention now to——"

"Yes; but just a second," Stranway interposed quickly. "The truth of it all—did it never come out? And Krinler——"

"As I have said, this occurred a great many years ago," Charlebois interrupted, with a grim smile; "but I believe that for a long time I was 'wanted' in those parts." He rose abruptly to his feet, pushed back his chair—and his voice suddenly took on a harsher tone as he began to pace up and down the room. "'Wanted!'—that is the word, is it not? I—Henri Raoul Charlebois—'wanted' for as brutal and wanton a deed as any with which the lowest criminal has ever been charged, and for which, but for a drunken freak, I should have paid with my life! And as for Krinler, what *proof* had I against him? None. I *knew* he did it—but that was quite another matter."

"You say 'for a long time.'" Stranway leaned in-

tently forward in his chair. "If the charge was eventually dropped, proof of some sort exonerating you must have come out."

"Of a sort—yes," Charlebois replied. "Krinler had an accomplice in the crime—a man by the name of Jackson. Jackson died some ten years ago confessing his share in the affair, but refusing to divulge the name or incriminate the one implicated with him in it. In his statement, however, he swore solemnly that the man, the tramp they had accused that night, had had nothing to do with it, and had only been used by them as a means of diverting suspicion from themselves."

"I see." Stranway nodded thoughtfully; then alertly: "And now?"

"And now?" The little old gentleman came to a sudden halt before Stranway's chair. "Now," he said sternly, "it is my turn! If I can not make Krinler answer for that night, because I cannot prove his guilt, I can at least make him answer for another crime, which, if less serious, is still serious enough to place him behind penitentiary walls and rid society of him for many years to come. I have waited long —fourteen years—to catch him red-handed in some crime that, knowing the man for what he is, I was confident he would commit sooner or later. No"—he put up his hand as Stranway was about to speak—"no; I am not confusing my dates. It was fourteen years ago, when this organization was in its infancy, less perfect, less powerful than it is to-day, that I first got track of him again here in New York—and from that day I have never lost sight of him. More than once I have believed I had him in my power, but each time he has eluded me. The task has been more than ordinarily difficult, for, shortly after Jackson signed his confession, Krinler discovered that I was

watching him and discovered my identity as well—since then he has not only been doubly on his guard, but on more than one occasion has even attempted my life."

Stranway nodded curtly, his eyes suddenly hard.

"I can quite understand that!" he said. "But Krinler, you say, is at the bottom of these silk robberies, and I am afraid I am not quite clear on that point. There is profit in it, of course—I believe the losses have amounted to something like fifteen or twenty thousand dollars in the last year—but that is not very much; not enough, I should imagine, to make it profitable to maintain so elaborate a blind as a business establishment on lower Broadway where rents and expenses are high."

"You are quite right, my boy," the little old gentleman answered gravely. "Krinler, however, is a man of two lives. His real business is the same business that he carried on in that little Western town—he runs a number of unsavory 'speak-easies' on the East Side, and is, in fact, acknowledged as a leader and the court of last appeal by a certain fraternity in gangland to whom he is known as an entirely different man from the pseudo eminently-respectable merchant, and, equally, by an entirely different name—not an uncommon one—Jake Sullivan. His dry-goods business, such as it is, was started by him when he first came to New York purely as a cloak of respectability that would enable him to pose as an honest man. The business was not established for the purpose of covering up any specific crime such as the silk thefts—that came much later, you understand?—it was simply a means already at hand of carrying out still another criminal operation, which, when the idea presented itself to him, he no doubt considered was,

even as a side issue, too good to be overlooked."

"But how did you discover that Krinler was at the bottom of these robberies?" demanded Stranway.

The little old gentleman smiled.

"The first loss by theft was reported by Krinler himself—a clever move if he had had only the authorities to deal with. After that, first one and then another of the large retail establishments began to report like thefts, and occasionally again Krinler would do so himself. It is not surprising, I think, that I read the handwriting on the wall."

"But it has been going on for nearly a year and a half," Stranway objected. "If you knew, why didn't——"

"Proof!" Charlebois broke in a little bitterly. "It is the same old story—proof, proof, proof! Of what avail to be morally certain of a fact—and lack the proof? I have it all now except for the one final link in the chain of evidence that I am counting upon to-night to furnish—but it has taken the whole of that year and a half to reach this point. His plan was ingenious, for, whatever else Krinler is, he is clever enough where viciousness and deviltry are in question. You know what the public knows through the newspapers: merely that cases of silk from France have again and again mysteriously disappeared from the steamship docks. Just how the cases were stolen I did not know, and I do not know even yet, except that Krinler goes to the docks in a motor launch for them—we shall see to-night—but I do know that every yard of the stolen goods was sold over his counters in plain daylight and under the noses of the police, to whom he complained most bitterly of his losses and of the lack of protection they afforded him!"

"I don't understand," said Stranway frowning.

"Nor did I—until now," Charlebois rejoined whimsically. "And yet it is very simple. You will remember that I sent Lacroix to France six months ago. Krinler has a confederate there, ostensibly a manufacturers' agent, who is in close touch with the American buyers who go over to France, and is thus frequently able to find out not only the description of the goods they order, but—what is equally vital to Krinler—the shipping instructions as well, such as date, and the line and name of steamer on which the goods are to be forwarded. Whenever this information was obtainable, Krinler's confederate would place a small rush order for identically the same quality of silk to be shipped *immediately* to Krinler in New York, advising Krinler of the shipping instructions given for the goods purchased by the American buyer. You can see readily enough what followed. Krinler would pay freight and duty on his own shipment, which in nearly every case would arrive *prior* to the other, take the goods to his store—and steal the other shipment on arrival. This he could then sell openly and with impunity. He had invoices and papers covering every detail of his own *bona fide* transaction that accounted beyond question for his being in possession of *similar* goods to those stolen—and a business record of fourteen years behind him to back that up! How he gets the stolen goods to his store and still preserves his incognito amongst those on the East Side who help him, is what to-night must solve. Occasionally, as I have told you, he would steal his own shipment to safeguard himself from suspicion; and even this had its profitable side—he saved the duty. He had only to place a duplicate order for the supposedly stolen goods, and, when that arrived, pro-

duce the stolen silk and sell it with the other! Do you understand, my boy?"

With a low whistle, Stranway rose to his feet, walked to the window and stared out for a moment through the darkness into the little courtyard—then he turned and faced Charlebois soberly.

"You are right!" he said. "He is clever—damnably clever! And yet—it may be stupidity on my part, but I cannot see how he succeeded in the actual thefts—the docks, for instance! If they were watched——"

"It is just there that the difficulty has come in," Charlebois interposed quickly. *Which* dock? The stolen goods might be shipped from Marseilles, Havre, Cherbourg, or via Antwerp, or Hamburg, or London, or Southampton, or a half dozen other ports. They rarely arrived here twice by the same line—rarely were stolen a second time from the same dock! To watch every dock in New York on both sides of the river would require a veritable army of police. It was an impossible task, and——" He broke off suddenly, stepped quickly to the desk as the telephone rang, and lifted the receiver to his ear. "Yes? Hello! Hello!" he said. "What is it?"

For a moment the little old gentleman listened without a word, while Stranway watched a tense expression settling on the other's face; then with a crisp: "Very good—at once!" Charlebois replaced the receiver on the hook, and turned briskly to Stranway.

"That was Flint," he said rapidly. "Krinler, or in this instance 'Sullivan,' is already at the rendezvous for the evening—a saloon of his on the Bowery that operates under the guise of a restaurant. I will give you the address, and a carefully detailed description of Krinler that will enable you to recognize him in his underworld character. Here is the plan. You are

to make up as a mechanic, not too clean—and get down there as soon as possible. You are expected. Go in by the alleyway—there is a back door there. Your name is Fallon. You are supposed to be employed by one of the Harlem River boat clubs, the Wayagamack, to look after their motor launches."

"Yes," said Stranway quietly. "Fallon—Wayagamack—go on."

Charlebois' steel-blue eyes grew troubled.

"I am afraid that I am practically asking you to take your life in your hands, my boy," he said gruffly, in an effort to hide a sudden rush of emotion; "but, as I have already said, I see no other way. From the outset in this case I have striven to reach Krinler through one of his East Side accomplices. Flint has finally succeeded in bribing the man who runs Krinler's motor boat on these nefarious expeditions—a man named Whitie Wilkes. Wilkes conveniently took sick this morning—and you are a very intimate pal of his who can be trusted both to keep your mouth shut and to take a hand in any dirty work that offers a fair chance of success with not too much risk of being caught at it. You are supposed to know that that is what you are wanted for. Wilkes has arranged with Krinler that you are to take his place. From Lacroix I know that the shipment of silk Krinler is after tonight is over in Hoboken at the K. & L. Line dock. Your part must be no more than that of a witness. Let them steal the case without interference and start away with it. They cannot go very far, for I shall be at hand with a sufficient force in the electric launch to make the capture of Krinler, his motor boat and all in it, yourself included, a certainty. To make our case against him with the authorities flawless and insure the extreme penalty that the law can inflict, we

must know every detail of the method by which he has worked—that is your part, my boy—a dangerous one, but a necessary one. Is it clear? Do you fully understand?"

"I understand—perfectly," said Stranway seriously.

"Then," said Charlebois, reaching quickly into a drawer of the desk, "here is the address, and Krinler's description; and here are your credentials—a note from Wilkes, together with details of Wilkes himself covering anything that Krinler, if suspicious, might be liable to ask you. You can study the memoranda while you are dressing." He extended two folded pieces of paper to Stranway; then, stepping forward, laid his hand affectionately on Stranway's shoulder. "I am exposing you to great risk, my boy," he added anxiously, his face clouding.

Stranway smiled gravely, shaking his head.

"I do not think there is much to fear," he said quietly; "but, in any case, to put an end to a scoundrel like that is worth a bit of a risk, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Charlebois slowly. "Yes—you are right. Perhaps I am growing old!" He smiled a little wistfully. "There was a time when I did not exaggerate my fears, or even consider them; but now" —his shoulders lifted in an almost pathetic little shrug—"well, go, my boy, go—and be on your guard!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WARNING

WITHOUT a word, only a clasp of the hand that Charlebois held out to him, Stranway turned, hurried from the Red Room, passed through the connecting doors to No. 1 Dominic Court, and entered what was known in the organization as the "property room," which, a master in the art of make-up himself, Charlebois kept supplied with every accessory. Here, Stranway opened the papers Charlebois had given him, and spread them out on the stand before the mirror that he might study them as he dressed. One contained but a few words rudely scrawled on a torn piece of dirty paper. It ran:

"Fallon's all rite. You can trust
him same as me. Whitie."

This, Stranway, after no more than a single glance, put aside, and devoted his attention to the second paper, which, apart from the address referred to by Charlebois and the promised description of Krinler, contained an intimate word picture of Whitie Wilkes, the man's age, his appearance, his dress, where he lived, his habits, his associates, and even his little mannerisms.

Stranway memorized the details quickly as he dressed; and then, finally, attired as a mechanic in accordance with the little old gentleman's instructions, respectable, if a little careless in appearance, a few touches of grime very sparingly and unostentatiously

applied to his face and hands, Stranway tore up the description of the man with whom he was to claim fellowship, tucked Whitie's note into his vest pocket, left the house, traversed the courtyard, and emerged on Sixth Avenue. From here he walked rapidly to Broadway, then downtown to Astor Place, and from there crossed to the Bowery. Ten minutes later he reached the corner occupied by the so-called restaurant to which he had been directed.

The side street, as he swung around the corner making for the alleyway at the rear, was for the moment deserted in his immediate vicinity, and, compared with the somewhat fulsome glare of the Bowery, ill-lighted and dark. He passed the side door of the saloon, reached the alleyway just beyond, turned into it quickly—and came to a sudden stop as, a few feet ahead of him, he made out a dark form huddling close up against the wall.

"Well, who the devil are you?" he snapped out, startled in spite of himself.

A sigh—a sigh of relief it seemed—and the rustle of a woman's garments answered him. And then Stranway for a moment stood very still, for now he had no need to see, no need to be told! He *knew!* It was the Orchid! It was like this that she almost always came—at an unexpected moment—but at a moment too that was almost always one of crisis. What was it, then, that had brought her here tonight? What sudden twist or turn in events had taken place in the short time since he had left Dominic Court?

And now, as he stepped quickly forward, he could just make out through the darkness the slim figure gowned all in black, the delicate orchid at her corsage, the dark, lustrous eyes.

"You!" There was apprehension and a strange hunger striving for supremacy in his voice. "You!" he said again. "You—why are you here?"

"Because," she answered, in a low, hesitant way, "because I am afraid."

"Afraid!" he repeated—and stared at her in genuine amazement. "You—afraid!"

"Yes," she said, and now there was a hint of wistfulness, and, too, a quiet dignity in her voice. "For once, I am afraid—for you." Then hurriedly: "I like this work to-night less than any we have ever done. Your risk is—is very, very great. Krinler has too much at stake to hesitate at anything, and, if the slightest suspicion is aroused in his mind, you will be so wholly in his power that you will not have even a fighting chance for your life. I want to warn you; I want to make you promise that, more than you have ever thought of doing before, you will take care of yourself to-night, and——"

"Wait!" There was wild eagerness in Stranway's hoarse whisper. "Answer me one question. Have you come from Charlebois with any message, have you brought me any instructions; or have you come for—for just this?"

She made no answer—only turned her head a little from him.

An instant he waited—and in that instant, thrilled, his heart pounding, a new world, a new joy, a new happiness, a new life seemed to stretch out in a glorious vista before him. And then, with a low, glad cry, he reached out and caught her hands.

"Then you care—you care—you *care!*" There was triumph in his voice, elation, a mighty uplift. "I know it now—at last! You care! And to-night is the end of the impossible situation that has existed

between us, and I am to know what it has all meant, and you and I——"

"You are not making to-night any easier by saying this," she broke in, a little quiver in her tones in spite of her effort to steady them. "If I——" She stopped suddenly, tensely. *"Listen!* There is some one coming to the back door!" Then, almost frantically, pushing him forward: "Go! Oh, go! If you are seen here with any one they will be suspicious at once. Go, go! Walk toward the door as though you had just entered the alleyway."

Stranway glanced quickly ahead of him. A glimmer of light showed through a door that was being opened not half a dozen paces away, and now the voices of two men reached him. She was right. He knew that. But for the fraction of a second he hesitated as the intense yearning for her swept upon him, and the temptation to fling every other consideration to the winds all but gained the mastery—and then, with apparent nonchalance as his sense of reason prevailed, he stepped forward. As he reached the doorway, he glanced back over his shoulder—the dark outline of the figure against the wall was no longer there. The Orchid was gone.

His brain was in riot, in turmoil—but it was a glad, wondrous turmoil! She had disappeared; circumstances had intervened once more between them as they invariably had in the past—but this time the "inevitableness" of it was gone forever. He knew now that she cared, that she *must* care; that was what had brought her here, that was why she had come—and nothing else mattered now but that. The rest, the fulfilment, since at last it was sure, could wait until—

"Well, what do you want?" The words, flung out

in an uncompromising growl, brought Stranway's self-communion to an abrupt termination.

"I'm looking for Mr. Jake Sullivan," he replied promptly, his faculties instantly on the alert.

The door was wide open, and, as he stood before it in the full glare of the light from within, two men confronted him. He swept them both with a well-simulated glance of indifference. The taller of the two was palpably Krinler; and, in view of the standard demanded by Dominic Court, the work of Krinler with false mustache and beard, though fairly well done, seemed crude to Stranway, and he smiled with grim irony to himself at the other's self-assurance.

"All right," Krinler responded bluntly. "I'm Sullivan—come on in." Then to his companion: "I'll see you again to-morrow night, Jim—so long!"

Stranway stepped forward into what proved to be a long, narrow hallway, and, as the man addressed as Jim went out, Krinler closed the door.

"Well, what do you want?" Krinler demanded again.

Stranway fumbled for the note in his pocket, produced it, and handed it to Krinler.

"My name's Fallon," he said. "Whitie Wilkes sent me." Then, dropping his voice circumspectly: "He said it was a motor boat job up against the fly-cops."

Krinler read the note, and then slowly began to tear it into little pieces—his fingers working mechanically, while his eyes, playing steadily on Stranway, took him in from head to foot.

"So you're Fallon, eh?" he observed, his survey completed. "Yes; Whitie spoke to me about you. He says you're pretty good with a motor boat—are you?"

"I wouldn't be likely to hold my job at the Wayag-

amack if I wasn't, would I?" Stranway countered. "You needn't worry none on that score."

"Yes, I guess you're all right that way—and the other way, as well," said Krinler after another moment's pause, during which he seemed to have summed Stranway up to his satisfaction. "Whitie's staking you, and that's enough. Come along in here"—he stepped to a door that opened off the hall a few feet away—"and I'll introduce you to——"

"Say, just a minute!" broke in Stranway. "Whitie tipped me off that there was a chance of going up the river in another way than in a motor boat if we was caught to-night. That's all right; only I ain't stuck on it just for the sake of the excitement—see?"

Krinler grinned.

"Yes—I see," he said. "Well, there'll be enough in it sticking to us so's you won't need that club job of yours any more. Is that good enough?"

"You bet!" agreed Stranway, heartily. "That's the talk! Whitie said you was square, an' what Whitie says goes. I'm satisfied."

"Come in here, then," invited Krinler, throwing open the door before which he stood.

Stranway followed the other into a rather dingy and ill-lighted little room, where two men, hard-faced, and forbidding in appearance, were playing cards and growling at each other over a small table.

"Time's up!" announced Krinler crisply. "Here's the pal that is going to take Whitie's place. Shake hands with Fallon here, and quit your scrapping."

Both men jerked their cards into the center of the table, rose from their seats, and shook hands in turn with Stranway, as Krinler introduced them.

"And now," ordered Krinler, "we'll split up, and waste no time." He turned to the smaller of the

two men. "You, Laurie, you go along with Fallon, and get down there as soon as you can. Leowitz and me'll follow. Go on, now—beat it!"

The man addressed as Laurie nodded to Stranway. "Come on!" he said laconically—and led the way out through the hall into the alleyway, and from there to the street.

The man appeared little inclined to talk, and Stranway, for the best of reasons, was in no small measure relieved at the other's taciturnity; he had no wish for conversation that might at any instant plunge him into a position with a *bona fide* intimate of Whitie Wilkes from which he would not be able to extricate himself —and to his satisfaction, both in the subway to Brooklyn Bridge, and afterwards, while threading the dark, narrow streets leading to the water-front of the East River, no more than the barest of commonplaces passed between them. Finally, they came out upon a quay, and Laurie pointed to a good-sized motor boat, perhaps thirty feet long and very narrow in the beam, that was moored alongside with a dinghy made fast to her stern.

"Get in," he said, "and have a look at her engines, while I get her lights fixed up."

Stranway dropped into the boat—and then, for the first time, a feeling that closely approximated dismay came over him. The *Cherokee,* Charlebois' launch, was fast; but he could see at a glance now that, in comparison, the *Cherokee* was little better than a snail—this was a *speed-boat* of the latest and most approved type!

His face was set in the darkness as he bent over the engines, and, after examining them, tested the self-starting lever. It was grimly obvious now that there was other work for him that night besides being

merely a passive witness to what transpired! When the time came, this boat must not be allowed to run away from the *Cherokee,* and there was only one way to prevent it—a breakdown of some sort—a severed battery wire, for instance. He thrust his hand quickly into his pocket and brought out a large clasp-knife. This he opened, and laid on the bottom of the boat at the edge of the grating—it would be unobserved there, and, in the excitement when the chase began, he could use it at an instant's notice without fear of being detected.

He stood up quietly as Laurie, lamp in hand, came toward him from the bow, where the red and green lights were already lighted. Stranway smiled in savage appreciation to himself—the men he was dealing with were far indeed from being fools—there were the police boats on the river to be reckoned with, and to attempt to evade them with the crackle of the exhaust shrieking out the boat's whereabouts was but to invite investigation and arrest for the infringement of that most stringent of all laws that demanded the prescribed lights on every craft under way.

Laurie clambered past him, placed the stern light in its socket, and, after examining the dinghy's towline, went forward again. A moment later, footsteps sounded on the quay above; and then Krinler's voice:

"All right, below there?"

"All right," Laurie answered.

"Cast off, then!" Krinler ordered, dropping into the stern of the boat beside Stranway; and then crisply, as the other two let go the lines and took their places forward at the steering wheel: "Go ahead, Fallon—and give her all she's got! It's dark tonight, and we can make an early start. We don't want to lose any time on the way over."

CHAPTER XXIV

ON NARROW MARGIN

ONCE under way, there was no more talking. Shouting alone would have been of any avail against the roar and crackle of the exhaust from the high-powered engines, and, as Stranway opened them out, he smiled grimly. She *was* fast—the fastest boat he had ever been in. They shot under Brooklyn bridge, towering like a gigantic black ribbon above their heads; and then, before he could well realize it, they had rounded the Battery, and were hearing up the Hudson, heading in a diagonal course across the river for Hoboken.

For perhaps fifteen minutes they held this course, pointing well up the river, and then Krinler leaned over, suddenly extinguished the stern light, and shouted in Stranway's ear to stop the engines.

Stranway, as he obeyed, could see that the boat was swinging shoreward in a long turn toward the Jersey side, and that the bow lights, like the stern, were out. And now, with the engines silent, there began to come the night sounds from the river, and the occasional clang of trolley bells from the shore, the dark outline of which was just discernible against a background of scattered street lamps and lighted windows.

"Fast, ain't she?" whispered Krinler. "Isn't anything like her up at the Wayagamack, is there?"

"No," said Stranway. "I guess there ain't."

"You bet there ain't!" exclaimed Krinler boast-

fully. "There's nothing in these waters to touch her. We'll drift down now with the tide and current to the dock we want—just ahead there a bit. Mind you keep quiet, and don't let a sound out of you!"

It had been a clever maneuver. The motor boat, had any one been watching, would have been swallowed up in the darkness and have disappeared utterly at the spot where her engines stopped and her lights went out—while now, much nearer inshore and drifting silently, she was safe from prying eyes. Again Stranway smiled grimly. There was no sign of the *Cherokee* of course, though he knew that she must be lying somewhere near at hand, hidden in the darkness, and ready to play her part when Krinler should have finished his work and could be caught red-handed with the stolen goods in his possession.

And now something black loomed up above them on their right. The boat's side scraped gently—the dock —they were alongside the river end of it. The pound of Stranway's heart quickened—the game was on in deadly earnest. The boat scraped on a few yards more; then the two men in the bow stopped her way, and Krinler shoved a boat-hook into Stranway's hand.

"Hold on with that, and don't let her bump," he breathed; then, leaving Stranway, he went forward to join the other two, who were working busily at the pier-head planking.

It was very dark, and, for a few moments, Stranway could not make out distinctly what the three men were about, until presently a plank, short, dripping, was lifted from overside and laid in the bottom of the boat, then another and another, until a yawning hole showed black even against the blackness—and then he barely suppressed the exclamation that rose to his lips as understanding flashed upon him. The pieces of

planking, which obviously formed part of the sheeting of the pier-head, were being taken from just low enough below the water's edge to allow for the boat's draft, and just high enough above to allow her to pass in through the opening! But how the planks came to be so uniform in length, and how they had been removed so easily and expeditiously was another matter —and one that puzzled him.

He had, however, little time to give that problem any thought—Krinler was calling to him in low, guarded tones:

"Let go there, Fallon, and push the stern out!"

They were going in underneath—that was evident enough now! But then—what? The two men, with Krinler aiding, were warping the boat's nose into the opening. Slowly they got her around; and then all three men seemed to disappear suddenly from Stranway's sight in the blackness, as, with not more than two feet of clearance above the boat, they stooped to allow the planking above to pass over them. Then, with the bow well in beneath the dock, the boat stopped again, and Krinler with one of the others came clambering over the engines to the stern where he, Stranway, stood.

"Here, Fallon," Krinler ordered, "help Laurie with the dinghy while we get in the rest of the way. Get hold of the dinghy's line, and haul her in close against our stern. You, Laurie, take your boat-hook and keep her straight so's she won't raise the whole of Hoboken slapping her sides against the piling going in."

"Sure!" said Stranway promptly, and, leaning over the little flush-deck at the stern, reached out for the dinghy's line—and then, in a flash of premonitory intuition, he whirled around—*too late!* A crashing blow from the boat-hook caught him on the side of the

head-lights, streaks of them, red, burning like fiery brands, danced for an instant before his eyes, and then the sense of falling into unutterable depths was upon him, and he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes again, an intense blackness seemed to have settled down like a pall around him, and he could see nothing; nor could he hear anything except a soft, constant sound of lapping water. His head was confused, and throbbed with intolerable pain. Something seemed to choke him, stifle him, nauseate him. He tried to move, to cry out—and he could do neither. Where was he? What had happened? For a moment he lay staring helplessly into the blackness, and then suddenly his brain cleared, and a full realization of his peril surged upon him. *Trapped!* Charlebois' unusual fears, the Orchid's fears that had caused her to act as she had never acted before, fears so real that they had even led her into making a tacit confession of her love, were grimly justified—he was gagged, his hands tied behind his back, his feet tightly bound together.

There came then the sound of some one moving; and then a round, white ray of light hovered for an instant over him—and went out. He was still in the motor boat—he had caught a glimpse of the engines as the light touched them.

"Got your senses back at last, what little you ever had of them, have you?" It was Krinler's voice, pitched in oily, taunting, vicious tones. "You poor fool, did you think that officious old maniac with one foot in the grave could beat me? Well, you'll pay for thinking so with your life! You, and he, and the lot of you! I've got you all to-night—*all,* do you understand? You've been in my road too long! You've become too dangerous!" The man's voice rose in

hoarse, brutal passion. "Did you think I didn't know you? Did you think I didn't know every move that's been made to-night? Old Charlebois is hanging around outside there now in a launch waiting for me to come out loaded down with cases! Well, he won't be disappointed—I promise you that! Whitie Wilkes played his cards pretty well, didn't he? Perhaps it will interest you to know that *I* was the one who put him up to falling for bribery when my man over in Paris tumbled to what yours was doing there."

Krinler paused, laughing low, menacingly.

For an instant Stranway closed his eyes. There was no bluff in what Krinler had said. He knew that well enough—too well to delude himself with any false hopes. But he would have liked to have had a chance to fight for his life! He began to tug silently at his bonds—it was the one meager hope he had.

"Wanted to find out how it was done, eh?" continued Krinler, but now there was a change in his voice again—it had dropped to a mocking sneer. "Well, seeing that you're paying a pretty stiff price for the information, I'll tell you. You see, we know two or three weeks ahead what dock the stuff is coming to, and a few hours' work each night for three or four nights is more than enough to get an opening ready by cutting the sheeting of the pier-head so that we can lift it out when we want to. We know the markings on the cases, and it's not a very hard job to find them again, no matter how much cargo is in the dock-shed, when Leowitz, who is a first-class stevedore, keeps his eye out for them in unloading. But what's puzzled you, maybe, is how we get the cases away, seeing that most of them are tolerably heavy and the size of a small house. Well, just look up above you!"

Stranway was still tugging at his bonds—futilely;

but his eyes followed the ray of the flashlight in Krinler's hand to a little cross directly above their heads that was chalked in white on a small trap-door which, at most, could not have been more than two and a half feet square.

"Doesn't look big enough to get a case through, does it?" Krinler chuckled maliciously. "Well, it isn't—not according to the way you and the police have got it into your heads we do it. That's the trap-door of sweepings and rubbish that every dock's got one or more of. The case comes through there, every sliver of it—after it's been opened above, the bolts of silk passed down, and the case itself broken up into pieces! Simple, isn't it—when you know how!"

Once more Krinler paused—and then he bent his head suddenly close to Stranway's.

"Do you know why I'm telling you this?" he rasped in a lowered voice. "To show you where you stand—what your chances are—yours and the others! I wouldn't tell you if you were going to *live*, would I? Well, I'll tell you more—for the same reason. You know who I am, but those two forward there don't. To them I'm just Sullivan. You'd like to know how the stuff gets into Krinler's store on Broadway? Well, it's taken from here to a little hiding place on the East Side—even these fellows don't know what becomes of it after that. They get their share in cash. All they know is that Sullivan sells it somewhere. Simple again, isn't it? Sullivan sells it to Krinler." He straightened up. "And now I guess we'll get along with the performance. I don't want to keep you waiting any longer than necessary! We're not dealing in *silk* to-night, but as old Charlebois is waiting for us to come out with some cases it wouldn't do, as I said, to disappoint him—three or four small cases,

no matter what they are, that will come through the trap-door ought to look big enough in the dark when they're piled together to satisfy him. Now then"—Krinler raised his voice a little to carry to the two men in the bow—"now then, let's get busy!"

In the minutes that followed Stranway watched the three men force the trap-door above the boat, and hoist themselves up and through it. And then, realizing that he was alone in the boat for a moment, he began to wrench at his bonds with the frenzy of a madman. Danger and peril he had been in before, but he had never been nearer his death, he knew all too well, than he was at that instant. And it was not only his own peril with which he had to reckon now! There was Charlebois, and those with him in the *Cherokee!* He did not know in what manner Charlebois was to be trapped, but he did not question either Krinler's intentions or Krinler's ability to carry out his threats by means of some preconceived plan—the man was too confident, too brutally sure of himself to leave any room for doubt on that score. It was death, too, for Charlebois and those waiting with him somewhere there outside, Krinler had boasted—unless he, Stranway, could in some way get a warning to them. The sweat oozed out in great beads upon his forehead—not a strand of the ropes that held him would yield a fraction of an inch in spite of his almost superhuman efforts. And then, as he squirmed, he felt something hard and lumpy on the floor under the small of his back, and suddenly a wild hope thrilled him. The knife! The *opened* knife that he had laid at the edge of the grating! If his fingers could only reach it, he could saw his wrists apart!

Quickly now, raising his body by throwing his weight

upon his shoulders, so that he would not disturb the position of the knife, he shifted his own position slightly. He could feel the knife now against his coat sleeve. Again he moved, and this time his fingers touched the blade—and then, suddenly, he lay passive, quiet, still. A ray of light from the trap-door was directed full upon him. Krinler was giving some directions about lowering a case.

The light vanished. Instantly Stranway's fingers seized the blade, turned it around, gripped the handle, and, sawing back and forth, succeeded in severing the cords that bound his wrists. And then again he lay still as the light reappeared from above, and one of the men dropped into the bow of the motor boat.

An agony of minutes followed. From the trap-door they lowered in succession four small cases, while the flashlight streamed almost continuously down upon the boat—and to Stranway there seemed to be something cruelly ironical in that prolonged glare, for now, more than ever, he needed another instant during which he might be free from observation.

Would it never come? Yes—now! The light for the moment was gone again from above—the man in the bow was stumbling about, piling the cases one on the other. With a quick, noiseless movement, Stranway twisted forward, cut the knot at his ankles—and had time only to resume his apparently helpless position as Krinler dropped through the trap-door into the stern of the boat, and took a fifth box, a very small one, from the man still above. A cold drop trickled from Stranway's forehead to his cheek—he had won the trick by a margin of seconds.

Stranway lay motionless. He had not had time to remove the gag; but his hands, that were again under his back as though still tied, were free, and a jerk at

his ankles would equally free his feet—if Krinler did not notice that the knot, which was underneath and against the flooring of the boat, was cut! But for the moment at least, Krinler paid no attention to him, and it seemed to Stranway that he scarcely breathed as he lay there grimly determined now to let circumstances dictate his next move; for, though impulse prompted him to take the initiative and fling himself suddenly upon Krinler, he realized it was too desperate a chance to attempt other than as a last resort, since his first thought now was to find some means of warning Charlebois and those on the *Cherokee* that, far from playing into their hands, Krinler, instead, was but setting a trap of some kind for their destruction.

He heard the trap-door being closed. This was followed almost immediately by the faint splash of oars and the low tones of Leowitz and Laurie, who were now obviously in the dinghy. The dinghy seemed to be moving away. Krinler was busy fumbling with the box he had brought aboard. Presently the dinghy returned, and Leowitz spoke:

"They're outside there around the pier-head in their launch."

"All right," rejoined Krinler gruffly. "Get the motor boat's head into the opening, so that we can shoot her out to them to play with!"

The dinghy edged around to the bow, there was a slight splashing again, and then Stranway felt the motor boat begin to move slowly. After what seemed an interminable time the dinghy came back again to the stern, and Krinler leaned over the side.

"That'll do," he directed. "She's far enough out to go straight the rest of the way herself once we start her. Keep the dinghy close to the stern there

where I can jump for it. Pass me the line! I'll be ready in a minute."

He stepped the few feet forward of Stranway to the engines, dropped the dinghy's line there, set the box down and suddenly threw the rays of the flashlight upon it. Stranway's eyes followed the light involuntarily. One side of the box had been loosened, and from it Krinler now took out a small package; then, turning abruptly around, he bent down, and held the package to Stranway's ear—it gave out a faint, regular, ticking sound.

"Hear it, can't you?" Krinler inquired with a malicious chuckle. "It's a little token of my regard for your friends out there—nitro-glycerine—enough to blow them, and you, too, into smaller pieces than'll ever be found." And then passion crept hoarsely into his voice. "I'll teach you to meddle with me!" he snarled. "It's set for *five* minutes—you can amuse yourself by counting 'em! We'll send the boat out at half speed, and I guess if your launch out there isn't alongside by that time it'll be close enough to answer the purpose—they'll be kind of anxious to get their claws on the bait, meaning the cases! And"—he reverted suddenly to his malicious chuckle—"you'll excuse me now if I hurry, won't you?"

For a moment Stranway's brain seemed to react only to a sort of horrified fascination, as he watched Krinler replace the bomb in the case, and make the dinghy's line fast to the motor boat's self-starting lever—and then in a lightning flash relief swept upon him. After all, the game was his—*all his!* Krinler with every move now was playing into his hands. He had only to wait. Krinler would clamber back into the dinghy, jerk the starting lever open, let go the line from the dinghy end, and the motor boat would

shoot out into the stream. He had then only to kick off the ropes from his feet, get up, throw the case with the nitro-glycerine overboard, and Krinler, together with the others in the dinghy, would be caught like rats in a trap underneath the pier where—

"Good-by," sneered Krinler. "I guess you're——" He stopped suddenly as his flashlight's rays shot full on the cords around Stranway's feet, and an oath burst fiercely from his lips.

Stranway waited for no more. His one chance now was to fight for his life and for the lives of those outside there depending upon him—Krinler had seen the severed knot. Desperately he wrenched his ankles free, jumped to his feet, and, forgetting the numbness that would be occasioned by the tight-drawn bonds, lurched forward unsteadily, stumbled heavily against the dinghy's line that Krinler had fastened to the starting lever—and the lever was jerked open. And then, before Stranway had time fairly to realize what had happened, the boat, under the sudden prod of her powerful engines, lunged swiftly forward. He caught a momentary sight of Krinler standing upright, an unreal, wavering, grotesque shadow forward by the engines—and then something, a wall of blackness, rushed toward them, and struck Krinler's head with a sickening crunch, dropping the man like a log, stunned and senseless, to the bottom of the boat. Instantly Stranway ducked his head and threw himself downward toward the flush-deck at the stern. But he was not quick enough—not low enough! The solid top of the opening that had caught the other's head now struck Stranway full upon the shoulder with a smashing blow that swept him across the little deck and flung him headlong into the water.

He rose to the surface, tore the gag from his mouth,

and dashed the water from his eyes. He was just outside the pier. His left arm and shoulder were useless, and a little cry escaped him as he tried to move them. Wildly he looked around him. Unless in some way he could intervene, Charlebois now would go rushing to his death in the wake of the motor boat. But as yet there was nothing in sight except the dinghy and the motor boat itself. The dinghy had, of course, been dragged out of the opening by the motor boat, and, Stranway could see that the two men in her, evidently afraid to hang on for fear of the explosion, had cast off, leaving Krinler to his fate, and were now sculling for their lives around the end of the pier. The motor boat was headed out into the stream, but still there was no sign of—yes, there she was! Swinging at full speed around the end of the pier opposite to that taken by the dinghy, a white wave curling from her bows, came the *Cherokee*.

"*Cherokee! Cherokee!*" Stranway shouted with all his might.

They did not hear him! He groaned in agony—then raised himself to his armpits, treading water desperately, splashing frantically with his uninjured hand and arm.

"*Cherokee! Cherokee!*" he yelled like a madman. "Stop! It's Stranway! For God's sake, don't follow that boat! Stop! *Cherokee! Cherokee!*"

His lips moved in silent gratitude. They had heard him. The *Cherokee* was heading around in his direction. But now he was no longer watching her—he was straining his eyes riverward. It was hard to keep afloat, for the pain in his arm and shoulder were draining the last of his strength away from him, and his brain was growing strangely sick and giddy; but he knew he was waiting, watching for something. He

went under once, came up—and a great flare of light that was dotted with black specks of wreckage met his eyes, and to his ears there came the roar of a terrific concussion. He told himself in a curious sing-song way that this was what he had been waiting for, and that the motor boat was torn to splinters. Then he went under again—and then he realized that he was being pulled in over the *Cherokee's* side, while Charlebois' voice in anxious tones reached him, it seemed, from a great distance:

"What has happened? Are you hurt, my boy? And Krinler, where is Krinler?"

"Krinler—Krinler is dead." Stranway answered weakly—and fainted.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MESSAGE

STRANWAY tossed the book he had been reading, or, rather, attempting to read, aside; and, rising from the lounging chair which, half an hour before he had drawn up beside the reading lamp in his cosily furnished Sixth Avenue quarters, he began to pace uneasily up and down the room. It was no use! He could not focus his mind upon even a single paragraph. All day a sense of depression had been growing steadily upon him, and, do what he would, he could not shake it off. And now he had reached a state of mind where his spirits were at a lower ebb than ever.

A prescience of evil—a foreboding? Why? Was it superstition? Ridiculous! There wasn't anything in the world that could not be explained by natural causes. Well, then, what natural cause was there wherewith to explain his present mental condition? Was he a bit under par—had he been working too hard? He shook his head. No, that wasn't it. Physically, he had never felt better than at this present moment. What was it, then? He might as well fight it out here and now and get to the bottom of it—and get rid of it! There *must* be a cause. Was it the cumulative effect of the strange and unusual happenings that had been going on now for many months—for a year? Perhaps! Anyway, whether that was the solution or not, it was at least not an illogical possibility. Everything in life, from the little things to the

great, was climacteric. But why, if that were the explanation, should there be any more reason for a climax to-night than there had been last night, or last month, or a year ago? Conditions were relatively the same.

He halted at the window, pushed the portière absently aside, thrust his hands in his pockets, and stood staring out at the street below him. It was late, near midnight, and the thoroughfare, that section of it at least that confronted him, was practically deserted. There was nothing to see. But still he stood there—and his mind, steered now into the channel of the past twelve months, began to plot a mental chart, as it were, of the route that he had travelled.

It was a year since the night that defined itself in his mind, not as the night when he had so nearly lost his life at Krinler's hands, but as the night when he had been so sure that he had won the love of the woman who had come to mean everything in life to him, so sure that from then on the mysterious barrier that had existed between them, whatever it might have been, was finally and for all time removed, and that he would thereafter be free to go to her when he would—but since that night he had never seen her.

And then, almost immediately following that same night, an unaccountable thing had happened. Charlebois had removed the Red Ledger from the safe in the Red Room of Dominic Court, and from that time he, Stranway, had never laid eyes on it. It had not slowed up or interfered with the work of the organization, for, during the year as Stranway recalled it, beginning with the account of Chen Yang and the Golden Joss, a score—yes, perhaps twice that number!—of entries must have been written off; but the Red Ledger itself was no more in evidence.

On both these counts he had questioned the little old gentleman—once in reference to the Red Ledger; many, many times in reference to the Orchid. But Charlebois had been more evasive than ever; indeed, a decided change had come over Charlebois himself. He was still the same lovable, affectionate, and, yes, implacable little old gentleman as ever, but he had become markedly preoccupied, and there had come into the kindly blue eyes a trace of trouble and anxiety that of late had never left them.

To his questions anent the removal of the Red Ledger, he, Stranway, had received only a quizzical shake of the head in reply; and the answer to his oft-reiterated questions about the Orchid were summed up in the statement that she was safe and well, and that the time was drawing near when, unless misfortune intervened, he, Stranway, would see her again under happier conditions than had existed before—nothing more definite than that.

No longer ago than that afternoon he had brought the subject up again, and he remembered Charlebois' answer now word for word.

"Yes, I know! I know!" the little old gentleman had said, with an affectionate pat of the hand on his, Stranway's, shoulder. "I know your secret, my boy; and, I believe, hers too. And it has made me very happy—but you must wait, as I have already told you so many times. It will not be long now—sooner, much sooner, perhaps, than, from your past experience, you might expect."

That was all. Not another word had he been able to get out of the little old gentleman.

With a shrug of his shoulders that he tried to pass off upon himself as one of philosophical resignation, Stranway half turned from the window—and abruptly

turned back again. A car had suddenly drawn up at the curb in front of his door, and in the light from a near-by street lamp he thought he recognized it as one of the cars belonging to Dominic Court. The next instant any doubt about it was dismissed, as he saw that it was Flint who left the driver's seat and now got out of the car.

A queer, twisted little smile crossed Stranway's lips. What was bringing Flint here to-night? He, Stranway, was a little "jumpy" of course, but what was the reason for this unlooked-for visit? Was Flint a sort of harbinger of evil, coming suddenly now to substantiate with some ill tidings his, Stranway's, strange forebodings? Was something amiss that would only too miserably justify the sense of depression that clung to him so persistently—or was it merely, as so often happened, that some relatively trivial matter, but one however requiring immediate attention, had cropped up unexpectedly at Dominic Court? Certainly, all had been quiet there when he had left the Red Room several hours earlier that evening.

He walked to the entrance door of his apartment, and opened it as Flint was in the act of pushing the bell button.

"Well, Flint?" he demanded quickly.

The man had a flat package in his hand, which he extended to Stranway.

"I was to give you this," he said briefly.

Stranway took the package.

"No other message?" he asked.

Flint pointed to a white envelope that was tucked under the string with which the package was tied.

"Nothing but that," he answered.

"I see," said Stranway; and then abruptly: "Have you just come from the Court?"

"Yes," Flint answered, "just a few minutes ago."

"Everything all right there?"

"Yes," said Flint, "so far as I know. Had you any particular reason for asking, or any message you want me to take back?"

"No," said Stranway half to himself; "no particular reason. I just wanted to know that everything was quiet. There's no message to take back."

"I'll get along, then," said Flint.

"Right!" responded Stranway. "Good-night."

He closed the door, and, carrying the package to his sitting-room table, opened the envelope that accompanied it. It contained a note in Charlebois' crabbed, angular hand. He read it slowly, a strange, intent expression gathering on his face:

"Dominic Court,
"Thursday evening.

"My dear Boy:—

"I shall be away all day to-morrow, but I shall be back at nine o'clock in the evening. Come to me in the Red Room at that hour to-morrow night without fail. Allow nothing, however important it may appear to be, to interfere with this. I shall have strange things to say to you, and matters of the gravest importance to discuss.

"But meanwhile I desire you to read the pages I am sending with this note, as they have a very direct bearing on what I shall have to say to you when we are together. They were written by me nineteen years ago and within a few days of the actual date upon which the events that they relate took place—and they were written at the time in order that no single detail, of what you will recognize must have been the most

poignant and tragic experience of my life, should escape my memory in after years.

"C."

The most poignant and tragic experience in Charlebois' life! Stranway, with a premonition of he knew not what sweeping upon him, hastily picked up the package and untied it. It contained a number of sheets of paper, written, like the note, in Charlebois' unmistakeable hand, but the writing was a little faded and the paper was slightly yellowish with age. Nineteen years ago, Charlebois had said! Stranway drew the lounging chair closer to the table, adjusted the reading lamp, and sat down to read the manuscript.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OLD MANUSCRIPT

THE manuscript began without date line, or preamble of any sort:

It was a night of violent storm, and, save for the intermittent flashes of lightning, sullenly, pitilessly black. Moaning, with my hands stretched out before me as a blind man walks in unknown paths, I staggered on. I was weak, ill, at the end of my strength, and I remember that I muttered queerly to myself:

"Go on! Go about your business! You, in the prime of life—*begging!* You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Go on, now—get out of here!"

My reeling brain kept repeating and reiterating the words with a sort of horrible, fiendish insistency, as though to beat through the state of semi-unconsciousness that was stealing upon me, and so taunt me to the last in ghoulish glee with the inhuman irony of it all.

I took a step forward—and lunged against a tree trunk, my feet sinking ankle deep in a pool of soft, oozy mud and water. Who was it had spoken those words—where was it that I had heard them? They seemed to repeat themselves in a woman's voice; a woman's voice that somehow, too, seemed to be accompanied by the slam of a door—or was that only the crash of a tree to earth in the forest around me, or but a fiercer onrush of wind that, sweeping merci-

less, icy sheets of rain upon me, drenched and numbed me so!

In the prime of life! Suddenly I laughed aloud, hysterically, wildly. It was true, quite true! I *was* in my prime. How old was I—forty-one, or two, or three—or was it forty-five? But it was true—I was in my prime—friendless, penniless, alone, ill with a malady that had racked and robbed me of vitality since childhood; near, now, to death's door, unless help came soon. Again I laughed, and I remember that I shuddered at the unnatural sound. The prime of life—what a ghastly, damning jest!

I pressed my hand fiercely over the wet, unshorn hair that had straggled into my eyes. If I could only *think*—rationally! If I could only stop that giddy swimming in my head long enough to make some logical use of the little bodily strength that was left, instead of expending it in aimless wanderings! Where was I? Who was it had spoken those words —and *where* was I when I had heard them?

A woman—yes; it was a woman who had uttered them. I could remember a woman in a doorway. It was in a little village somewhere with a single street, the—yes, that was it!—the last house in the village, because after that there had been woods and forest and mountains. Yes, that was it—the *last* house, my last chance of succor since all the others had rebuffed me—and she had slammed the door in my face. Then I had stumbled out into the woods, into the forest, into the mountains, into this entombing maze in which I had lost myself, and that was now holding me a prisoner for death. That had been early morning—it was night now.

A deep-toned, ominous rumble grew louder, nearer —then with a terrifying crash, bursting like the dis-

charge of heavy artillery, a peal of thunder echoed, reverberated and died away in sullen, angry murmurs, as though reluctant to depart. I shivered and crouched against a tree. The next instant the night was as full noontide. A forked, jagged tongue of lightning tore across the sky, and again, and once again; and the forest seemed to bow its head in chidden hopelessness before Heaven's wrath: the giant trees with drooping tops and wind-torn boughs; the small brush, borne down and listless; the damp, sodden, spiritless earth beneath; while around and on every side, like strange, irregular paths leading to everywhere and to nowhere, the flashes opened dim avenues between the trees whose end was—blackness.

At the third flash my eyes fixed and held, straining to my right where an avenue, longer, more regular than those myriad other perplexing openings, showed in the lightning's glare—and at its end, for an instant, I caught the sheen of dark, turbulent, lashing water. Then all was inky black again.

Painfully, slowly, I started forward in that direction. Why, or with what hope that might be realized in so doing, I did not know. It seemed, perhaps, that it was ordained I should see that sheet of water. Subconsciously, vaguely, the thought came to me that it might be a river, and, possibly, somewhere, a house upon its bank; concretely, it was merely for the moment a definite objective.

Again and again I stumbled. I had grown weaker. My head was light and dizzy. Even the tree trunks seemed to elude my groping hands, and I fell continuously against them, bruising my body and tearing my face. But it did not hurt me. I was past all that. I did not feel the blows.

It was a long way to the river, to the water, to

whatever it was—and it had looked to be only a few yards off! But, finally, I staggered out from between two trees that, somehow, had always seemed to be maliciously thrusting themselves in front of me, always blocking my way, and reached the edge of the water. And then suddenly I cried out hoarsely, and began to run, spurting madly, frantically. A yard, two, three I covered—and then my strength failed. I pitched forward on my face, panting, gasping, crying weakly to myself, for ahead of me through the darkness showed a tiny pin-point of light.

For a long time I lay full length upon the soft muddy earth, the rain whipping and lashing at my thinly clad form, the wind cutting through the soaked garments, chilling me to the bone; then over my senses there began to steal a sensation of rest and relaxation, and there was no more cold, and the pain and weakness and misery were being supplanted by an agreeable languor, a feeling of dreamy comfort and repose, and—

The light!

With a supreme effort I roused myself—had I been so near the end! I prayed for strength to reach the light, just for strength enough to reach the light! I was on my feet now, rocking dizzily, my limbs shaking beneath me. I took a step forward, stumbled, recovered myself, and for a little way made progress more steadily, then stumbled again, and this time fell.

Was it an hour, ten minutes, or a year of nights? It might have been one or the other to me, for all was chaos, turmoil in my brain. There were no such things as surroundings any more; everything was extraneous save only the point of light—that was the one lucid idea that remained to me.

Again and again, I stumbled, fell, rose and stag-

gered on. There was shelter where that light was—and food. Food! How long was it since I had eaten anything? Yesterday—nothing. The day before, then? Perhaps! Perhaps I had eaten then—I did not remember.

I was crawling now—the last ten yards. It *was* a window light, and what a warm, heavenly patch of white radiance it threw out into the storm! It looked so cheery, so human. Surely anybody with a light like that would let me in! *They* wouldn't slam the door upon me! No, they couldn't do that! I was safe now—safe.

Past the window and to the door I crawled, pulled myself to my feet, and banged upon the panels with my fists. And then I cried out hopelessly, despairingly, and clung to the side-posts of the door to keep myself from falling. *The light was gone!*

My hands slipped from their hold, and I sank weakly to my knees. There was no trick, no hallucination. The light was gone—utterly, instantly, at my first knock. And there was no sound from within—only the roar of the storm, only blackness, only terror. My hand struck against the door knob. I grasped at it feverishly, and tried to open the door. It was locked. Then in a paroxysm of despair I beat madly with my hands once more upon the panels, and cried out again and again for help. There was no answer, no sign of life—and presently, a huddled heap, I lay inertly upon the threshold, with my face buried in my hands.

Suddenly my hands were jerked roughly apart, my head thrown back, and a lantern was thrust into my face. Startled, frightened, for there had been no sound and the door was still closed, I made a wild, futile effort to free myself from the vise-like grip

upon my head. I tried to cry aloud, but my voice somehow choked in my throat. The dark form of a man was bending over me, and, back of the lantern's light that hurt and blinded me, I could feel the other's eyes boring into my face. My mind was groping feebly for some reason that would explain the sudden extinguishing of the light in the window, this sudden, unwarranted attack upon me here in this lonely spot on the forest's edge. I knew that the man must have come out of the back door to steal around upon me from the side of the house, but—

My head sank back again on the ground—the man had let go his hold. And now, with a guttural exclamation that mingled, it seemed to me, both amazement and pity, he called to some one within the house. A moment more and the door was opened by a woman. Then the man, handing her the lantern, stooped, caught me beneath the shoulders, and half dragged, half lifted me inside.

For the next few minutes I was only dimly conscious of what occurred. The door was closed, and I heard the sound of a heavy metal bolt being thrown into place. The man and the woman exchanged quick sentences, but the words confused me strangely, and I could not catch the drift of what was said. They hurried this way and that about the room—and then the man was holding brandy to my lips.

The stimulant seemed to course through my veins like molten fire, bringing me new life and strength, and I gulped greedily at the glass. With a smile, the man allowed me to empty it, and then, assisting me to my feet, deftly and rapidly began to remove my wet clothes. We were alone now—I could hear the woman moving about in another room—and I stared curiously, questioningly, at the short, stocky, dark-

eyed, brown-bearded man in the rough, ill-fitting clothes, who was working over me.

Once or twice I essayed to speak, but the other silenced me with a kindly, if imperative, grunt, and a shake of the head; and finally, when I was thoroughly dried and invested with a change of clothing, he led me to a chair before the table in the center of the room. Here, presently, the woman brought me a steaming bowl of meat stew, and I fell upon it ravenously.

I was still weak to the verge of helplessness, and unutterably weary; but thanks to the brandy, and now this hot, grateful food, the giddiness, the semi-delirium of mind was passing, and my brain began to clear. It had all been like some horrible nightmare, but now— I found myself scraping with my spoon at the bottom of an empty bowl. I pushed the bowl from me, and looked up. The man and the woman, the woman with a young child in her arms, were standing together in the far corner, talking in low tones. Both turned, meeting my eyes, and the man came quickly forward.

"I not speak ver' good English," he said deprecatingly. "You are better?"

"Better!" I repeated huskily. "I owe you my life."

"That is nothing—nothing," responded the other, with a sweep of his hands. "You are better? You are strong once more? That is the thing."

"Yes; thanks to you," I replied.

"Then," said the man abruptly, "I think you better much had go at once."

My heart sank suddenly within me, as I rose and clutched weakly at the table edge.

"Go—out there—into that—to-night?" I faltered. "I—I would not live till morning."

"It is ver' bad, that is true," said the man in a low tone; "but maybe it more safer than here—yes?"

Miserably, desperately, I looked around the room. It was a rough place, roughly furnished; an old shack that once might have been deserted, it seemed, for now it was scarcely habitable. It contained a narrow bed, a child's cot, a plain deal table, several chairs—nothing else. And then I looked at the woman. Her eyes were full of trouble, full of lurking fear, and there was a pinched, drawn look of dread and terror on her face which, even in my distracted state, I could see had robbed her of the comeliness and youth that under happier circumstances must assuredly have been hers; and I saw, too, in spite of her rough dress and uncouth surroundings, that there was an air of culture and refinement about her which belied her outward appearance.

My eyes went back to search the man's face. The man was regarding me steadily, and, it seemed, too, pityingly, if I read him aright. I passed my hand across my forehead—what strange matter lay behind all this? This woman, so patently far removed from what must have been her usual environment; this man, whose every gesture, every movement, even the inflection of whose voice bespoke one of education, of breeding, of a walk in life so at variance with these surroundings! They were foreigners, of course, and that was why, I now realized, I had not understood what they had said when they had talked together; but it was strange, very strange! I was to go away again! But it seemed so incongruous, so strange, so very strange, that after such kindness they would drive me out into the night, and—

"I am sorry"—the man spoke again, gently—"ver'

sorry, but it much best you go. For your sake, my friend. It not safe here."

"I don't know what you mean," I said helplessly. "Not safe here, you say? And, yet, to go out there in the storm——"

"Yes," the man interposed gravely; "maybe you die. But maybe you have better chance that way."

"Oh, I don't know what you mean!" I cried out again. "Don't drive me out to-night! For God's sake, don't do that! I am too weak and sick! If it is safe here for a woman and a child, it is safe enough for me."

"Listen," said the man earnestly. "It not safe here for woman, not for child—not for me. Maybe we live too long here already. If storm go by, we pass on to-morrow. But maybe that too late. Maybe to-night we finish."

For a moment I could not answer—my brain seemed to be groping blindly in the dark, trying to comprehend, to grasp the literal meaning of the other's words, for there was no mistaking the man's deadly seriousness or his good faith.

"You mean," I said at last, "that you fear something—some danger that may come, that may fall to-night?"

"It is so," the man answered simply.

"What is it?" I asked. "Danger from where—from whom?"

The man shook his head.

"I tell no more," he said. "You know all I tell."

I flung out my arms impulsively, pleadingly to him.

"I don't care!" I blurted out. "I don't care what it is! If there's a risk, I'll take it! I'll take any risk rather than go out there into *that* again to-night!

Let me stay! For God's sake, let me stay! Let me stay, won't you?"

The man hesitated an instant, and I could see that he was scrutinizing me in a troubled, uncertain way; then, with a lift of his shoulders, he turned abruptly, and, walking over to the woman, began to talk rapidly to her.

Still clinging to the table, I watched them feverishly, my ears strained, not to catch their words, for I could not understand, of course, could not even recognize the language they were speaking, but to read the verdict in the intonation of their voices. A long time, an endless time it seemed to me, they talked, while my eyes held anxiously first on one face and then on the other; and then, as abruptly as he had gone, the man came back to the table.

"We not put you out," he announced quietly. "But already I have warn you it not safe—yes? You stay—then that blame on yourself."

"Yes!" I cried. "Yes, yes; and thank God for such as you!"

The man smiled, half grimly, half sympathetically.

"Come," he said—and, taking my arm, led me into a small room partitioned off at the back.

Here, the lantern, still burning, hung from a nail on the wall. There was a stove, a crude and battered affair, alight—and a cot with a mattress and blanket upon it.

"You lie there," directed the man, motioning toward the cot.

"But that is yours," I protested. "I don't want to do that. The floor, anywhere, will do for me, and I shall be grateful enough for it."

"You lie there," repeated the man, and pushed me in a kindly way to the cot. "Maybe I not sleep much

to-night. I go out now, see about horse." He took down the lantern as he spoke, opened a door opposite the head of the cot that was evidently the back entrance to the shack, and went out.

For a moment I heard the man's steps squelching through the mud and water outside, then I lost them in the beat of the heavy rain upon the roof and the whistle and sweep of the wind eddying around the corners of the shack. I shuddered a little. What a wild, bitter night it was! I bowed my head in thankfulness, and my eyes grew moist. How good they were to me, these strangers, so full of some great trouble of their own!

I lay down upon the cot and drew the blanket over me. The woman's voice, crooning softly to the child, reached me as a sound from some far, indeterminate distance; I was vaguely conscious that the man entered the shack again—and then, in utter exhaustion, I slept.

I remember that I was beset with nightmares, each successive one more terrifying than its predecessor, and that, finally, one more horribly realistic than all the rest assailed me. It was so vivid that I shall never forget it. I lay at the bottom of a great gulch, and I was pinioned hand and foot and could not move. A sheer wall of rock rose up from the gulch on either hand, and, high above me on the nearer edge, demons of ugly and monstrous shapes were laughing and jeering at me, leaping about in diabolical glee as they poised a gigantic boulder preparatory to dropping it down upon me. I tore and struggled at my bonds like a maniac. There was a wild chorus of yells—and hurtling downward came the boulder. I watched it turning over and over in the air as it descended, watched it fascinated, with stilled heart, with lips

grown too numb to utter a sound. It seemed to cover me now with its awful shadow. Another instant, and it would crush me, mangle me into a shapeless, lifeless mass. On it came, straight for me. There was scarcely breathing space between me and it now. Then with incredible swiftness it swerved, missed me by a hair's-breadth, crashed into the earth beside me with a thunderous roar, and—

I sat bolt upright on the cot, the sweat standing out in great beads upon my forehead—and the crash of a revolver shot died echoing away, and a piercing scream in a woman's voice was ringing in my ears.

I jumped from the cot—and stood like one stricken into stone, a chill at my heart that left me pulseless. The front room was dark, but the lantern in the back room was still burning, and in the opening in the partition between the two rooms (it could hardly be called a doorway), like a weird, fantastic shape, bulked the figure of the man who had befriended me, the child held tightly in the crook of his left arm, while he poured shot after shot from the revolver in his right hand into the blackness before him. Yells came responsively from outside, mingling with tinkling glass, as, from outside too, the bullets rained through the window.

The next instant the man laid the child on the floor behind the partition, and dashed into the darkness of the outer room. He came back in a moment, rushed to the cot, dropped to his knees, and pulled out a box a foot square from beneath it. This, as he regained his feet, he thrust into my hands, then snatched up the child into his own arms again, and reached for the latch of the back door.

"Come—we go—*quick!*" he gasped out.

"But the woman—she——" The words froze on my

lips as, for the fraction of a second that seemed to span an eternity of time, the other's eyes met mine.

There was a look on the man's face such as I had never seen on the face of a human being before—the skin was a leaden white where it showed through the beard, and it was drawn and contorted out of shape by the out-thrust lower jaw; there was horror in the eyes, a pitiful, hopeless grief, and a fury insensate.

"Dead!" he whispered hoarsely. "They kill her by shot through window. Come quick now! Maybe too late already! Maybe they around at back now! Come *quick!* You follow—run!" He wrenched the door open and sprang outside.

Excitement, fear, horror—what was it gave me strength? I did not know. It was perhaps only nervous strength, but it was strength. For the moment, at least, my limbs were steady beneath me, and the box in my arms, if heavy, was a weight that I did not feel. Close behind the other I raced through the darkness—a few yards along the level—then down a short, steep declivity—and then we came to the water's edge beside a boat that was drawn up on the shore.

The man halted, snatched the box from me, dropped it on the ground, and pushed the child into my arms instead; then, turning the boat over—it had been bottom side up—he threw in the box, heaved the heavy craft (I say "heavy," for it seemed to take all his strength), down the shore, and ran the stern out into the water.

"Get in!" he panted wildly.

Shouts were coming now from the back of the house. Thank God for the noise of the storm!—the child was crying. Hurriedly, frantically, I clambered into the boat. The man, with feet braced on the

shore, leaned forward to shove out the bow—and then a lightning flash suddenly disclosed a number of dark forms silhouetted against the bank not more than thirty or forty yards away. I screamed out to him in warning. There was a chorus of yells and the sharp crackle of revolver shots; then a broken cry; then a splash as, his hands slipping weakly from the bow as the boat shot out from the shore, the man pitched face downward into the water—and then darkness hid the scene from me.

Current and waves caught the boat, swirling it around and around, tossing it this way and that, threatening every instant to capsize it. My mind near to the verge of madness, I laid the child on the bottom of the boat, and, stumbling forward to the middle thwart, snatched up the oars. I shipped them after several futile attempts, and then worked desperately to get the boat's head around into the teeth of the wind. This I finally succeeded in doing, and the little craft rode more securely, but I could make no headway. The current, aided by both wind and waves, seemed to be running a veritable mill-race, and the little strength I had, *all* of it, only sufficed to keep the boat's head straight. It was a struggle that I realized well enough could not continue. I was growing miserably weak again.

Run before the storm? Yes, of course, I could do that. Why hadn't I done it in the first place? Well, there was the man who had been shot, and who had fallen into the water. I had tried to get back to him, hadn't I? But I couldn't get back. It was utterly beyond my strength. And now, probably, the man was dead.

My mind was in agony. Dead! What a night of terror! The woman was dead. There was just my-

self and the child left. The child! God help the little mite! It was alone now, dependent on me. On *me!* What ghastly irony!

And then I remember that I broke into discordant laughter, as an oar slipped from my grasp and the boat, flat-bottomed, swung off into the trough of the waves, shipped a little water, and spun around stern to the storm.

I snatched at the oar again as it thumped on its pin at the gunwale. Fate seemed to have decided the course of the boat, forcing me to give up my futile struggle. And now it was so much easier that the effort required of me was even within my meager strength, for I had only to dip an oar occasionally, now on one side, now on the other—that was all.

The child was crying piteously. I reached forward and drew it awkwardly to me. The man had snatched it from its crib, blanket, bedclothes and all, and now, as best I could, I wrapped the blanket closer around it, then placed the little bundle on the bottom of the boat again and braced it between my feet—I had to keep my hands free for the oars. The act seemed to rouse me, not only mentally, but to stir vitality in my feeble body—there was a little life, not mine alone, to fight for, to save.

The hours passed fearfully. I sat there crouched and numbed and wet, plying almost automatically my oars when occasion demanded. Now and again the lightning made a weird display of my surroundings—the dark, choppy waves; the boat; the child at my feet; and glimpses of black, irregular outlines, the shore, that each time seemed to show more indistinctly as though further away. Toward morning the storm passed and the wind went down, but the waves still appeared to run as high as ever.

Gray streaks of dawn tinged the east. Anxiously I looked around me. No wonder the waves still ran so high! I understood now. I must have started from a stream or river, which would account for the strength of the current that had primarily swept the boat along, but now I was well out almost in the center of a large lake. The waves were running nearly straight down its length, and it was impossible to tell where I had come from, other than, vaguely, that the river or stream lay somewhere miles away astern.

My eyes dropped to the little bundle at my feet—and a new and sudden fear took possession of me. How *still* it was! A child so young, scarcely more than a baby! How could it be expected to live through such a night! I had done my best, all I could, but I had not been able to keep the little one dry, or give it food, or shelter it. I bent anxiously down over it—and, as suddenly as I had known fear, I knew relief. The child was *sleeping*.

For a long time I watched the child—and then, putting to rout in turn the relief I had experienced in finding it still alive, came an abysmal sense of helplessness. What was I to do? If I had money, or even my strength—but I had neither!

It had grown brighter now, and I turned in my seat, searching the shore line. Ahead of me, on a point of land that jutted well out into the lake, were a number of houses. My eyes completed the circuit, came back to the boat—and fell upon the box that I had carried from the shack. I had forgotten all about it, and I had not seen it before because it was in the bow of the boat and my back had, of course, been turned to it. I reached for it now, and picked it up.

It was a metal box, with handles at either end, to one of which a key was fastened with twisted wire. I

detached the key, and opened the box. On top, in a shallow tray, lay a number of papers that were neatly folded and held together by an elastic band. I took these out, opened them one by one between dips at the oars—and, shaking my head, put them back again. They were in a foreign language, in foreign script. They meant nothing to me. And then I lifted out the tray—and, with a startled exclamation, my hands trembling so that I could scarcely hold the box, I sat there staring at its contents. It was full of money—*money!* Not foreign money—American money, in bills. A great deal of it! I did not know how much. But a great deal! All the box would hold! And the bills were of large denominations!

I replaced the tray, closed the box, locked it, and put the key in my pocket. There was no need to worry about the little one any more.

I turned in my seat again to get the bearing of the houses on the point. The waves would help me now, and, by edging in a little to the right, I was sure I could make a landing at that spot. And then I rowed as fast as my strength would let me.

Half an hour later, the boat grated on the shore, and, with the child and the box in my arms, I staggered toward the nearest house.

The manuscript ended abruptly at this point.

Stranway laid the faded sheets down on the table. His premonition of coming ill, rather than being in any way allayed, was now weighing more heavily upon him than ever. To-morrow night, Charlebois had said in his note. What would happen to-morrow night? The manuscript breathed in every line the promise of a sequel no less grim than the story of that *other* night nineteen years ago!

CHAPTER XXVII

ALL BUT ONE

IT was nine o'clock the next morning as Stranway, entering the Red Room, halted abruptly at the threshold and stared in a startled way, not at the little old gentleman of Dominic Court, who, dressed as he always was when indoors, in red velvet jacket and skull-cap with bobbing tassel, sat at his accustomed place at the antique, mahogany desk, but at the two objects which lay there on the desk itself. Still full of the story contained in the little old gentleman's manuscript, he had come here to-night more disturbed and strangely expectant than he could ever remember having been in the countless times he had entered this room before, and he had no need to be told that one of the objects now riveting his attention was the metal box described in Charlebois' manuscript; but it was the other object that held him far the more startled, amazed, and, in a sense, fascinated. For the first time in a year the Red Ledger was here in the Red Room again! He had not seen it in all that time. And now, its three great hasps unlocked, it lay open on the desk in front of Charlebois.

The little old gentleman's quiet voice broke the silence.

"Ah, my boy," he said with a grave smile, "you are surprised to see the Red Ledger back here again, and you are wondering why it has ever been away? And this box here—you recognize it, do you not, as the one you read about last night? All this, however, will be

made clear to you presently. As I told you in my note, I have strange things to say to you to-night. And first of all"—there was a sudden quiver in his voice as, almost caressingly it seemed, he laid his hand on the Red Ledger's open page—"I must say this to you: To-night, unless we meet with misfortune, this book will be closed forever."

For a moment Stranway neither moved nor spoke. It seemed as though he had been struck a sudden blow that confused his brain. *The Red Ledger closed forever!* He could not have heard aright! There must be some mistake! Why, his life, Charlebois' life, the lives of a hundred others were bound up, wrapped up indissolvably in that volume with its strange and singular accounts!

"Closed—forever?" The words came from him finally in a low, uncertain, almost self-questioning way.

Charlebois rose quietly from his seat.

"Come closer!" he said—and taking the pages of the Red Ledger in his hand, he allowed them to flutter slowly through his fingers. "You see, do you not? And this explains the reason why the Red Ledger has not been here during the last year—that in my own privacy I might, as it were, make a final audit of my accounts." He paused, and into the steel-blue eyes there came a shadow of yearning and wistfulness. "I think you will understand. I wanted to study long and carefully over each entry to make sure that I had paid to the best of my ability, and that there remained for me no more to do."

Stranway stared at the fluttering pages, a pang at his heart. No; there was no mistake. Each page that he saw was neatly ruled with long, diagonal, red balance lines.

"Yes; I see," he said numbly. "It is finished."

The little old gentleman shook his head.

"All but one," he said, with a sudden grimness creeping into his voice, as he laid his hand again on an open page before him. "All but this one here. And so there is still to-night—and this last account." Then brightly, with a smile lighting up his fine old face: "But you must not take it to heart, my boy. There should be joy in the knowledge of work well done—not sadness or regret—the joy of accomplishment."

"Theoretically—perhaps," admitted Stranway without enthusiasm. He waved his hand around the familiar surroundings. "And all this—is to go?" he asked monotonously.

"Not in a day," Charlebois answered gently. "There will still be much to do—many loose threads to tie—annuities to arrange for those who have served us so faithfully in the organization, a task that in itself is not a light one, for there are many on our rolls. No; there is still much to do, very much to do, so many details that will demand most careful attention—and you must help me, my boy. You are my son, you know, and I am an old man. You must help me now to set my house in order, for when I am gone it will all belong to you, and——"

"Don't speak like that," Stranway broke in, his words choking a little in his throat. "You have many, many years, please God, ahead of you. Indeed, that is the one thing that makes me glad all this is at an end—the danger you have run. For years you have done nothing but take risks; again and again your life has been attempted, and there has been neither day nor hour in all that time when you were free or safe from the possibility of attack. You know how often I

have pleaded with you to leave all active work to others, to me—and you would not. But you will now —and so I am glad that the Red Ledger is to be 'closed forever,' that you are safe, that there is an end to the danger that has always hung over you."

Charlebois smiled strangely.

"That might be true—to-morrow," he said.

"To-morrow?" repeated Stranway. "What do you mean?"

"There is still—*the last account*—to-night." Charlebois' voice was low, distrait, almost as though he were speaking to himself—and then, quite abruptly, he turned from the desk and paced twice the length of the room and back again. "I am in an unusual mood to-night, my boy," he said slowly, as he halted again before Stranway. "But after all, perhaps, it is easily accounted for. For many years this thing has been a living menace to more lives than one—to mine and to others. It is the account that knew its inception in the events of that night which I described in the manuscript I gave you to read. It began in death, as you now know, and if I am disquieted and anxious to-night as it approaches culmination, I——"

Stranway leaned suddenly forward and caught the little old gentleman's arm.

"You have felt it, too!" he exclaimed. "It has been with me all yesterday, and all to-day, and I do not like it. I do not like it," he repeated, drawing back his hand and sweeping it outward in an impulsive gesture. "This thing to-night, whatever it is—this last account—why not put it off until——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the little old gentleman crisply. "We are not children; nor, I trust, childishly superstitious. Let us try to forget such thoughts." He shook his shoulders as though literally to un-

burden himself of a load upon them, and smiled. Then he stepped back to the desk, pushed the Red Ledger, still open, a little to one side, drew the metal box toward him, took a key from his pocket, and, sitting down, motioned toward another chair in the corner. "Bring that armchair here to this side of the desk, and sit down beside me," he said. "I have much to say to you, my boy. And much," he added significantly, "that will interest you vitally."

At the last words, Stranway's eyes, that had been resting curiously on the box, swept quickly, questioningly, to the little old gentleman's face.

Charlebois smiled a little tolerantly, and motioned again toward the chair.

More perplexed and disturbed than ever, for Charlebois was far from his usual self to-night and the little old gentleman's manner worried him, Stranway started toward the chair—but halfway across the floor he came to a standstill with a sudden jerk.

What was that?

Breaking the silence of the room, for his own footsteps had been deadened by the heavy rug, there had come a quick, jumbled medley of strange little sounds: a sharp *tap* that mingled instantly with a curious tinkle, and then again with a low, whistling purr. Instinctively Stranway's eyes lifted to the window in front of him that, facing the desk, opened on the courtyard—and a dawning horror crept into them.

It was only for a second, no more, that his eyes held upon the window-pane, but in that brief instant he seemed to live for countless hours. There was a round hole in the glass, perfectly round, in size a little more than half the diameter of a dime, and the glass around the edges, though still holding together,

was shattered into innumerable spidery, cobwebby fractures.

Only a second it had been, no more—but he *knew*. With a cry like a wounded animal, in which bitterness, rage and grief struggled for the mastery, he turned and leaped for the desk. In a huddled posture, head and shoulders hanging limply over one side of the chair, the tasselled cap upon the floor, Charlebois was like one already dead. Frantically, Stranway caught the little old gentleman up in his arms and called his name. There was no answer. He felt desperately for the heart beat, caught it very faintly—and mad relief swept over him. There was a chance yet—at least a chance!

Tenderly, he laid Charlebois back, and, reaching for one of a series of buttons on the desk, pressed it violently twice in quick succession—like the dispatchers' "life and death" call, it was the emergency signal of the organization that reached every room in each of the four houses simultaneously, reached with its imperative summons every member of the organization who was anywhere within the walls of that unassuming little row of dwellings. Then he sprang for the window, and, oblivious of the possibility of attack upon himself, threw it open, and leaned out.

It was dark—he could see nothing. There was no sound save the rumble of traffic and the clang of trolley bells from near-by Sixth Avenue. He drew back from the window, and, his face drawn and set, ran again to Charlebois' side.

Steps were echoing through the halls and rooms, coming on at top speed. The glass-panelled door burst open, the red-silken portière was wrenched aside—and, headed by Pierre Verot, a little group of seven

or eight men rushed into the room. For an instant there was turmoil: a cry from one; a savage imprecation from the full heart of another—and then there fell a solemn, breathless hush.

Stranway had raised his hand; and, in complete command of himself, his brain alert and stimulated by the cold fury that was upon him, his words come now like trickling drops of ice water:

"He is alive yet. I do not know what his chances are. The bullet came through the window there from an air-gun, or a weapon that had a silencer—I heard no report. Sewell, telephone the doctor—get him here without an instant's delay!"

A man detached himself from the group, and rushed from the room.

"Rainier," Stranway went on, "take everybody available and search the Court, and surroundings. Don't let the roof of that storage building escape you. The shot might very easily have come from there. And see that a general alarm is sent out to every member of the organization in the city. If it becomes necessary we will have to notify the police, but in the meantime we do not want any publicity if we can help it. Verot, get a couch, bandages, hot water, and brandy in here at once!"

There was a rush of feet again—and, like hounds with leashes slipped, the men were gone.

Charlebois stirred for the first time and his lips moved. Stranway, supporting the little old gentleman in his arms, bent down his head to catch the words. The other's mind was wandering.

"The light is gone," Charlebois muttered. "The light in the window is gone. Let me in! For pity's sake, let me in! They're shooting through the window! Why do they always shoot through the window?

Get the boat off! They're on the bank! I can't pull back—I'm not strong enough. The boat's too heavy! I can't pull back, I tell you! I'll have to run before the storm—I'll—have—to——" His voice trailed off into nothingness.

A blinding mist filmed Stranway's eyes. Charlebois was living again that night of nineteen years ago—but to Stranway came thoughts and memories of more recent years, the years that embraced his association with the other, each seeming to bring this form in his arms more intimately near and necessary to him. He crushed them back. There would be time, too much of it, perhaps, for that later! Now, he must keep his brain and mind free and centered upon the present.

Verot and another man brought in a couch. They laid Charlebois upon it, and Stranway turned back the red velvet smoking jacket, exposing a constantly spreading crimson stain on the right side of the white shirt beneath. This latter he cut away, and began to staunch the flow of blood as best he could.

"Give him a little brandy, Verot—a teaspoonful," he directed tersely.

The minutes dragged by. Stranway, with ever increasing fear, continued steadily, but unavailingly, in his efforts to stop the flow of blood; while, at his nod, Verot, from time to time, administered the stimulant in small quantities.

"Give him more," Stranway ordered desperately at last.

Verot obeyed—and this time with some visible effect.

Charlebois' eyes opened, fixed on Stranway—and a wan smile hovered over the white lips.

Some one entered the room, stepped quickly to the

couch, and, with a single rapid motion, Stranway found himself brushed aside as the other dropped to his knees, and delved into the contents of a small black satchel. It was Doctor Damon, Charlebois' physician.

A glance, a short nod of greeting Stranway gave the doctor, and then his eyes fastened once more upon Charlebois. There was something in the little old gentleman's face that had not been there a moment ago—a pitiful struggle for consciousness, and wild anxiety in the steel-blue eyes.

And then, suddenly, Charlebois jerked himself up on his elbow.

"My boy, my boy!" he gasped. "Go—go at once! For God's sake, go this instant! There is another life in peril—go to—Flint—the——" He strove desperately for another word—and dropped back again unconscious.

Stranway, white to the lips, grasped the doctor's arm.

"Will he live?" he asked feverishly. "Is there any chance?"

"I do not know," the doctor answered, without lifting his head. "I have not seen the wound yet. But, in any case, you can do no good here, and——"

"Yes," Stranway broke in hoarsely; "I understand." Everything, all, seemed bound up in the stricken form before him, and his heart cried out within him not to leave the other; but dominating inclination, dominating his natural feelings, was that desperate, frantic appeal—an appeal so urgent that it had possibly cost Charlebois his chance of life to make it. He turned to Verot. "Flint—where is Flint?" he demanded, trying to steady his voice.

"At the garage," Verot answered.

"Phone him, then, that I am coming at once, and tell him to be ready for me," Stranway ordered hurriedly. "That will save time."

Verot instantly left the room.

Stranway's hand fell again on the doctor's arm. This time the doctor looked up, and for an instant the men's eyes held each other's in a long look, then Stranway's fingers closed in a fierce, hard pressure, fell away, and, with a last quick-flung glance at the little old gentleman, he stepped to the door. But here, suddenly, he turned, and ran back to the desk. That "last account," which so far he had not seen, held of course the key to Charlebois' appeal! He bent over the Red Ledger, still open at the page where the little old gentleman had left it. A single name was written at the top: "Kyrloff." A single word comprised a credit entry: "Sanctuary."

It told him little. But it seemed to burn into his brain, and scream out at him sardonically, as he ran back to the door. *Sanctuary!* Sanctuary—and Charlebois struck down without an instant's warning! There was something cruel in its mockery; something that seemed deliberate in its attempt to outrage at the expense of the man who had written it, that kindly, hallowed word.

Somewhere in one of the halls, as he raced along, Stranway picked up a cap. A dark form here and there, as he traversed the Court, rose suddenly before him as though to block his way—and, recognizing him, drew back. He dashed through the lane, and turned into Sixth Avenue—the garage was just around the corner, two blocks south. Here, on the avenue, that he might not attract attention, he dropped into a walk. After all, Flint would require a few minutes to get out a car—and it must be that a car was re-

quired, else Flint, who nearly always acted as chauffeur for the little old gentleman, would almost certainly not have been on Charlebois' mind.

He reached his corner and, on the run again, swung west around it. A big touring car was standing at the curb, with Flint in the driver's seat. Stranway sprang in beside the other.

"Go on—*quick!*" he panted.

The car leaped forward. From the wheel, Flint flung an inquiring glance at Stranway.

"Where to?" he asked.

Stranway strained forward in his seat, and stared in sudden dismay into Flint's face.

"Good God, don't *you* know?" he gasped.

The car slowed, and, almost humanly it seemed, poked its nose in a puzzled, bewildered way into the traffic of Sixth Avenue.

Flint shook his head.

"Does the name of Kyrloff help any?" demanded Stranway tensely.

Again Flint shook his head.

"I never heard of it before," he answered.

"But, at least, you know what has happened, don't you?" Stranway cried.

A bitter oath sprang from Flint's lips.

"Yes; I know that," he rasped out. "And God have mercy on the man who did it when we get our hands on him!"

Stranway was gnawing at his lips.

"What did Verot tell you over the phone?" he prodded swiftly.

"Only to be ready for you the moment you came—that Charlebois was very bad."

"Listen, then," said Stranway desperately. "Charlebois regained consciousness for a moment. He said

there was a life in danger. He mentioned you—you *must* know something about it."

Flint straightened a little in his seat.

"I thought perhaps you wanted a doctor, or something like that," he said quickly. "With Charlebois shot, I naturally thought that put an end to anything else to-night—and, besides, we weren't to start for nearly an hour yet. Yes; I think I know what you mean. But, at that, I don't know very much."

"Go on," urged Stranway eagerly.

"Well, yesterday afternoon," said Flint, "I drove Charlebois about twenty-five miles up the Hudson to a house, a big, lonely, deserted sort of place, that was, I should say, a half mile straight back in the country from the main road. We didn't go in, you understand—we just passed by the entrance gates. He told me to be particularly careful to get the location well fixed in my mind, for we were to go there again to-night—to leave here at half-past ten."

"What else?" Stranway bit off the words as the other paused.

"Nothing else," Flint replied a little helplessly. "That's all I know—that I was to drive him there again to-night."

A mirthless smile played for an instant over Stranway's lips, then grim lines took its place.

"Drive there *now*, then," he said between his teeth. "And drive for all you know, Flint!"

Flint made no answer in words, but the forward bound of the car was an eloquent response. Stranway flung himself back in his seat, a prey to perhaps the most violent emotions he had ever experienced in his life—grief now drowning out this new anxiety, now anxiety drowning out momentarily his grief. For a time, his thoughts ran shuttlewise; then, rousing him-

self, he resolutely put the thought of Charlebois' condition from him. This problem that confronted him must be tackled, grappled with—and how little there was with which to grapple! A life in the balance—and not a single tangible thread to guide him!

A cold dread swept over him. A *life* depending on him, on the course he should pursue! What was he to do? Go to the house? Yes, of course! He was going there now! But *afterwards?* Whose house was it? Whose life was it that hung in the balance? What were the final details Charlebois had meant to take up with him in connection with this "last account," that, originating nineteen years ago, had been a "living menace" ever since? What was the sequel to the story contained in Charlebois' manuscript? What was the denouement that Charlebois had planned? Perhaps now he, Stranway, would never know. He knew only that its culmination was to have been to-night, and that he was going now where Charlebois himself had planned to go, and that in some way, blindly, the stake he was playing for was a human life.

He touched Flint on the arm.

"Faster, Flint!" he said grimly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LONE HOUSE

ONLY the gentle lap of water upon the shore; only the faint night sounds—the light breeze whispering through the trees, the distant echo of a whistle from some craft upon the river.

To the left, like a sullen black mirror reflecting the stars in long, shimmering ripples, lay the Hudson; to the right, like a wall of darkness, the heavy, wooded land reached almost to the roadside; ahead, the powerful lamps of the car flung their beams far along the thread of highway—and painted in against the darker background the figures of Stranway and Flint, who stood facing each other in the light. Both men were coatless, dirty, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, their set, hard expressions accentuated by the grime and grease that smeared their faces.

Stranway pulled out his watch—and jerked it back into his pocket again.

"This is a bad business, Flint," he said anxiously. "I was counting on our lead as an asset—the start of an hour earlier than Charlebois had planned. Half of that and more is gone now, and unless we can get along immediately it will be all gone—and Heaven alone knows what's happening in the meantime!"

"We'll have another go at it." Flint swept the back of his hand savagely across his forehead to flirt away the clinging drops of perspiration. "I don't know, though, whether we can fix it or not."

Stranway shook his head.

"That won't do," he said decisively. "We've been too long over it now. How far is it from here to that house?"

"About two miles, I should say," Flint answered. "Not more than that, anyhow."

"Twenty minutes," Stranway calculated. "I'll go ahead, then. As soon as you get the car fixed, if you ever do, you can follow; and if you catch up with me on the way, so much the better. Now, how about finding the place?"

"Yes," agreed Flint; "I guess that's the best plan, except that you'd be alone, and——"

"Never mind about that," Stranway cut in. "How about finding the place?"

"You can't miss it," Flint replied. "There may be a lane or two, or something of that nature between here and there, but it's the first road leading off at right angles, say, a mile and a half ahead. It climbs a longish, stiff hill right from the start, and, a quarter of a mile beyond the brow of the hill, on your left, you'll come upon a low stone wall with two big stone gateposts at the entrance to the driveway. You can't see the house from the road, because it's set back in a thick grove of trees. And, as I told you, so far as I know, it's the only place anywhere around."

"All right," said Stranway curtly. He took his coat from the car and slipped it on. "Follow as soon as you can," he flung at his companion—and, without waiting for a reply, started off along the road, running with a long, easy, tireless stride.

For a long time the rays from the car's headlights pointed his way, then these gradually grew fainter, and finally blended into the surrounding darkness. Darkness! The darkness seemed suddenly to be ironically significant. Not only physically, but men-

tally, he was running in darkness in the most literal sense. What was ahead of him? What did he intend to do? If only Charlebois had been able to say a few words more, just a single word more perhaps! That hour! If they had only had that hour in the Red Room during which it had so clearly been the little old gentleman's intention to explain every detail of the night's plans! But they had not had that hour together; and, as it was, he, Stranway, knew nothing. *The last account!* He shrugged his shoulders grimly. It had become, so far as he was concerned, a game of hide-and-seek with the unknown—and he could only play it out now as best he might, depending on his own wits and as circumstances should favor him, to win it.

On he ran, tirelessly, doggedly, subconsciously reckoning the distance travelled by his pace and the elapsed time. He must be very near the road he was looking for now. Yes; here it was! And there could be no mistake—his eyes, grown accustomed to the darkness, noted its upward trend, and the higher land beyond.

He halted for an instant at the intersection of the roads, and listened as he looked behind him. Perhaps Flint was on his way again. But there was nothing—no sound—no sign of lights. He swerved into the cross-road, and climbed the hill; but, on gaining the summit, he went forward from that point with more caution, pausing every little while to look about him and listen again, for the house, according to Flint, could not be more than another four hundred yards or so, away. And this proved to be the case, for, presently, he saw the low stone wall on the left-hand side, and, a few yards farther on, he came upon the two stone gateposts.

He entered the driveway, and began to make his way silently along it. It was extremely dark here amongst the trees, and he could see nothing, until, perhaps a hundred yards in from the road, he found the driveway curving sharply to the right, and suddenly a gleam of light streamed out in front of him. He halted now to get his bearings. Ahead of him rose the dark outlines of a large house, which, from its size, and what he could see of its general appearance, was obviously the residence of some more than ordinarily wealthy man. The front of the house was in complete darkness—the light came from an open French window at the side, low down and almost on a level with the ground. He could see the driveway where the path of light cut across it, and beyond, very indistinctly, another building—the stables, or garage, probably.

Every faculty alert, Stranway started forward again, but now with even more caution than before. The driveway divided here—to sweep around to the front entrance, no doubt, and to lead to the rear past the side of the house. Keeping well out of the line of light, he crossed a short stretch of lawn, and gained the wall of the house. Voices reached him from the open French window now, and he crept noiselessly toward it, hugging close against the wall. A moment later, he was on his hands and knees at the edge of the window, whose sill, he found, was not more than three feet from the ground.

Just what he had expected to see he did not know; but the scene before him, as, raising his head cautiously, he peered into the room beyond, made all his precautions appear suddenly ridiculous and exaggerated. It was a large room, the dining room obviously, and luxuriously furnished. A round table in

the center, laid for four covers, sparkled and scintillated with cut glass and silver as the light from a magnificent candelabra fell upon it. Three men were in the room—servants; two were dressed in immaculate livery, and the third was unmistakably the typical butler. Elegance, luxury, refinement, ease and repose—the room exuded all that; but of danger, peril, a life in jeopardy, it seemed as far removed as were the earth's poles one from the other, and a puzzled, bewildered expression settled on Stranway's face.

A momentary silence had fallen on the room, but now one of the men spoke abruptly, and, it seemed to Stranway, uneasily:

"It's queer he ain't here yet. D'ye suppose that——"

"No," interrupted the butler gruffly. "He's late, that's all." Then suddenly, stepping quickly toward the window: "Listen! There he is now."

Instantly Stranway lay flat upon the ground. He had heard it too—the faint *chug-chug-chug* of a motor running at high speed somewhere out on the road—coming nearer. Some one else, from what had just been said, was expected. But this was quite as likely to be Flint! The thought for a moment brought a sense of disaster. Despite appearances, something *was* wrong here! The agonized appeal that he had read in Charlebois' face was proof enough of that, and if Flint *drove* in here—now! Stranway groaned to himself helplessly. The three men were grouped at the window above him. He could not make a single move without attracting their attention. He could not get to the gates to warn Flint to pass on with the car. He could only lie there impotently and listen.

And then, the next instant, he smiled to himself in relief. He was giving Flint credit for very little intelligence. Flint would never be fool enough to do

a thing like that, for it would— The smile faded, and Stranway's lips set in thin lines. Flint or not, the car had turned into the driveway!

There was a crunch of tires; a beam of light caught the corner of the house, swept along the wall closer and closer to where he lay—then swerved suddenly into the straight and played upon the doors of the garage beyond. The car rolled by, came to a standstill in front of the garage, a man jumped out, hurried toward the house, and disappeared through the back entrance.

It was not Flint, at any rate. Breathing easier, Stranway raised himself up again into his old position —the men had retreated from the window and were standing around the table. A door was thrown violently open, and a man, drawing his chauffeur's gloves from his hands as he entered, stepped into the room.

"Well, it's done!" he jerked out, with a short, unpleasant laugh. "Here, give me a drink, one of you —no; never mind, I'll help myself!" He reached out to the buffet beside him, picked up a decanter, poured out half a tumblerful, and swallowed the raw liquor at a single gulp.

The master of the house? Hardly! The man was well enough dressed, but there was an unkempt, unpolished look about him, and his face was coarse and brutal. The next words dispelled any lingering doubt as to the other's status in Stranway's mind.

"Did you meet anybody on the road, Jake?" asked the butler sharply.

The man addressed as Jake shook his head—and reached again for the decanter.

"Let that alone!" snapped the butler. "You've had enough!"

"One more," growled Jake. "I guess I've earned

it!" He helped himself to another four fingers. "Clean getaway!" He choked, as the stuff burnt his throat. "No; I didn't meet anybody, except a fellow whose car had broken down about two miles back along the road."

"Who was he?" demanded the butler quickly.

"How the devil do I know?" replied the other shortly. "I didn't stop to find out, did I? Anyway, it's no one to worry about—from the looks of him, he's there for the rest of the night."

One of the other men stirred impatiently.

"We're wasting time, ain't we?" he said roughly. "If it's a sure thing that Jake cinched it, we might as——"

"I told you once that it's done, didn't I?" Jake broke in with a muttered curse. "There was two of 'em in the room. The old fellow was sitting at his desk dressed up like a Punch and Judy show. I let him have it through the window with the air-gun. He just kind of *slid,* and—damn it, give me another drink! I——"

The butler jumped for the decanter and snatched it away.

"I told you before to let that alone!" he said savagely. "Go on with your story!"

The words seemed to be pounding with sledge hammer blows at Stranway's brain. His hands clenched, and the blood throbbed madly at his temples until his head whirled—before him, almost within arm's reach, self-confessed, stood the man who had shot Charlebois! Whatever else was the meaning of this scene, whatever else the night might hold in store, was for the moment blotted out from Stranway's mind, as an impulse to spring into the room and lock his fingers around the other's throat seized him. What did the

odds matter? What did anything matter so long as he dealt with that man *first?* The afterward could take care of itself! He found himself rising stealthily like a cat to spring—and then cold reason fell upon him, and he drew back. There *was* something else that mattered, some one's life; and this man would never get away from him now anyhow—he, Stranway, would see to that! And the others were equally guilty, weren't they? What were they saying?

"There ain't nothing more to go on about," said Jake sullenly, his eyes on the decanter in the butler's hand. "I jumped the fence and made my getaway. That's all there is to my end of it. How about yours? Is the other one here?"

"Yes—upstairs," the butler answered brusquely.

"Yes—and the sooner we get the job over the better!" snarled the man who had spoken before.

"Two killings in one night!" Jake burst into a harsh, uneasy laugh. "Give me another drop of that! I've got the shivers! I've got to have it, I tell you—I feel as though some one was *watching* me!"

The butler smashed the decanter down upon the table, and, grabbing the other's shoulders, shook him roughly.

"What's the matter with you?" he flared out. "Pull yourself together!"

"Oh, that's all right!" sneered Jake. "Wait till you've had your turn!"

"I've waited nineteen years, thanks to that meddling old fool Charlebois!" said the butler with an oath; "though there'd have been an end of him long ago if we'd been able to get our hands on the other one! He's been too infernally clever—until he fell into our trap. But we had them both to-night, either way. If you had fluked up, Jake, we'd have had Charlebois

here, along with the other one, instead of them being separated." There was a vicious leer on the man's face, as he waved his hands over the table with its snowy linen and glittering appointments. "It's just what Charlebois ordered, wasn't it? But it wasn't needed after all, and"—he flipped at the cords on the livery of the man nearest him—"we won't need this masquerade any more, either! We'll set the fire from the top of the house, when we've put the other one up there out of the road. You three can bring up the cans from the garage, and kerosene the whole top floor—what'll be left up there won't be enough to saddle us with anything! The house has been on the market for a year, and unoccupied until Charlebois bought it last week. No one except Charlebois knows that there's any one in it, and he's welcome to the knowledge—now! It will be half an hour at least before any one could notice the fire, and another half hour before any help could get here from the nearest town that would amount to anything—and by that time, I guess, it won't make any difference so far as we are concerned. Now, get this stuff off the table and put away, in case the fire doesn't reach this far. This house has got to have a deserted appearance, what's left of it."

"What about the grub—for the swell dinner?" asked Jake.

"Grub!" The butler laughed derisively. "Do you think I am a fool! There's no grub here—except that fruit there on the table, and the whiskey in the decanters to make a show. Throw them away."

It did not take long perhaps in actual time, but to Stranway, keyed up to the highest pitch of nervous tension, it seemed an eternity while the men dismantled the table appointments. The odds mattered

very much now! Four to one! And some one on the top floor was to be coldly and deliberately murdered before these men left the house! If only Flint would come *now!* He drew back a little and listened, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound from the direction of the road, but he could hear nothing. He glanced around him. It was dark everywhere save for the white pathway of light that streamed from the window—and this now, curiously, seemed to be growing fainter.

His eyes swept back to the interior of the room. The pseudo-butler was blowing out the candles in the candelabra; the table was bare of all its furnishings, silver, linen, china, glass—and the other three had gone. The man paused an instant before the last candle to stare critically around him, and in the dim light now, with his bloodless face, he seemed to stand out like a death's-head—then he snuffed the candle, and the face faded from Stranway's sight.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON THE TOP FLOOR

IT was dark now within and without. The man's footsteps crossed the room, and then a door opened and shut. Instantly, Stranway climbed noiselessly over the sill into the room.

The top floor! Granted that he was not seen, he could reach there ahead of the others, for they would still be busily engaged in changing their clothes and bringing in the cans of kerosene from the garage.

Stranway crossed the room, groped for the door knob, found it, opened the door quietly, and stepped over the threshold.

A faint light that sifted through a partially opened door somewhere at the rear of what, as he had rather expected, was a hall, and from which, too, there now came the sound of the men's voices again, enabled him to make out indistinctly a wide staircase immediately in front of him. A strange, musty smell assailed his nostrils. Also, queer, misty, white shapes loomed up here and there around him, one of which, on the wall near him, was just shoulder high. He reached up and felt over it with his hand. It was a large framed picture covered with a cotton sheet. It was apparent enough, as the man who had played the part of the butler had said, that the house had been long closed up—the previous occupants, evidently, desiring to sell it as it stood, furniture and all.

He mounted the stairs cautiously, gained the first landing, and stopped to listen. The men were still talk-

ing down there below. How much time had he? How long would it be before they were coming up the stairs?

The thought spurred him to quicker action, and he ran along the hall. It was dark now, almost absolutely black, but the banister rail, he found, continued on along the hall, as a guard, obviously, to what would otherwise have been an unprotected stair-well. Five minutes? Certainly, he could count on no more than that at most.

Five minutes! He was on the second flight of stairs now. Five minutes—in utter darkness—to find this "other one" that they had talked about—to find some way of outwitting that pack of human wolves below!

Again the banister guided him, this time along the second hallway; but now, suddenly it brought him violently up against a dead wall. This was the top floor, then—the house was only three stories high. Somewhere here, therefore, was the one he sought. But where? In one of the rooms? Yes; of course! There was no other logical answer to the question. Five minutes! Only four now! He was tempted to light a match, but the thought of the stair-well that opened straight down to the hall on the ground floor held him back. As well risk a torch! In the intense blackness, even a match flame would attract instant attention, if, by an unlucky chance, any one of the four men happened to be passing through the hall below at the moment.

Whatever rooms were in his immediate neighborhood, must, of course, open off the other side of the hall facing the banister. He crossed the hall, and found a door. It was not locked. He opened it, and called out softly. There was no response, no movement from within, no sound of breathing, only that

mustiness and that heavy, pulsing blackness. He tried the next door, and the next, and still two more, with the same result.

And then for an instant Stranway stood motionless, listening again intently, his face rigid, his jaws clamped hard together. There could be very little time left. He dared not reckon how much of it had gone—but, at least, there was no sound yet from below. The last account! He smiled bitterly. Yes; it looked like it now! The last account—for Charlebois, gentle, kindly, tender-hearted Charlebois—for that other life—and for his own!

Was there still another door? He could not see. He had traversed the entire length of the hall, and was on his way back now, on the same side as the stair-well, for at this end of the hall there had been rooms on each side. But he had already tried two here, and he could not now be more than two or three yards away from the head of the staircase again. No—he had misjudged the distance. There *was* another room, but unquestionably the last one this time.

His hand had fallen on the door knob, and now he opened the door and once more called out softly. He called out again—and hung there hesitant and beaten. It was an absolute certainty now that there were no more rooms on the top floor. And then the blood seemed to run suddenly cold in his veins. *Was there another staircase—another wing to the house?* The place looked big enough from the outside to make that more than a possibility. Was he, after all, in the wrong part of the house? Once more the bitter smile moved his lips. Fate was playing a grim hand tonight, and—

He was still at the doorway. Had he imagined it—or was there some one inside? Faint, low, indis-

tinct, came a sound, that, as nearly as he could define it, was like something rubbing and rustling on the floor. Instantly, he stepped inside the room, and this time closed the door behind him.

"Is anyone here?" he asked tensely. "I'm a friend —Stranway. Answer me!"

There was no reply; only the same sound—but now it was louder, with a strange persistency about it as though it were trying desperately to attract his attention. He took a match from his pocket, struck it—and, while a second passed, stood there a prey, it seemed, to every emotion that the human soul could know. Fierce ecstasy, a mad joy, a wild terror, hope, despair—one and all were his, as the match spurted into flame. On the floor before him, almost at his feet, lay the Orchid, her slim, black-gowned form tightly bound with heavy cord, a gag brutally covering the lower part of her face.

And then a low, inarticulate cry came from Stranway's lips, as he sprang forward and dropped on his knees beside her. The Orchid! The woman he loved —who loved him! Hers, then, was the "other life" in peril—the last account before the Red Ledger was closed forever! His brain was racing madly. The last account! It linked her now irrefutably with that manuscript Charlebois had given him to read. There had been nothing last night, when he had read the story, to suggest that she had any connection with it, but now—yes, he was sure of it, sure that he knew. The child of nineteen years ago was the Orchid of to-day!

He had torn the gag from her mouth, and his knife was busy with the cords around her.

"Ewen!" she said faintly. "You—oh, Ewen!"

It was the first time he had ever heard his name

from her lips, and it thrilled him now and set the blood pounding wildly at his heart. And now the cords were gone, and he lifted her to her feet, and into his arms —and crushed her to him. And there in the blackness for one great moment, the greatest he had known in all his life, his lips found hers, and her eyelids, and buried themselves in her hair, and pressed against the white, rounded throat as she lay in his embrace.

"I love you," he whispered hoarsely. "I love you."

She drew back from him, half sobbing, half laughing—and he felt her sway suddenly upon her feet.

"You are weak!" he cried—and caught her close to him again.

"I have been here a long time—since dark," she said. "The cords were very tight. I—I was afraid that no one would come until it was too late. But now it is all right, isn't it? And in a little while when the stiffness is gone I shall be able to walk all right."

"There is no time to wait for that," he answered. "I'll carry you, and——"

"Ewen—what do you mean?" Her hand closed tightly over his, holding him back. "Haven't you plenty of men with you? Isn't everything all right?"

"No," he said hurriedly. "You and I are alone in the house, except for those devils below, who, I suppose, brought you here. They'll be upstairs any moment now, and unless we can get down before they come we're trapped."

She made no answer, said no word; only her hand closed again in a little pressure over his, as he took her up in his arms and began to make his way toward the door.

"You are a brave little woman," he said huskily, "and it would only make matters worse if I attempted

to deceive you. You—we have been in peril before. But to-night I do not know. We—we may never come through this. There may never be another chance, but this moment at least is ours and you are mine now, dear, you know, and so I want to know, not all your secret, there is not time for that, but just your name."

It seemed to Stranway that she drew herself a little closer to him before she answered.

"I cannot tell you," she said wistfully, "because—because I do not know myself. Of course, in the outside world, I have had to be Miss Judson, or Miss Somebody-else equally fictitious; but here in the organization since the time I was a little girl and Charlebois gave me the name because I was so fond of the flower, I have always been called the Orchid. Indeed, those were his positive instructions, and I have never been known by any other name at Dominic Court. And—and that was why I—I never gave you a chance to—oh, you *will* understand, won't you? I was very sensitive about it from the first—with you. I was afraid that you would think it silly, absurd, a pose on my part to be called the Orchid—and, oh, I had a hundred other thoughts, but I did not know my own name, and so——"

"But at the last!" he broke in eagerly. "That night when we were after Krinler! You came to me of your own accord, and that night I was very sure you would not have tried to find a way to leave me as you had always done before."

"It was different that night," she whispered. "Nothing mattered then but you. The danger that you were in frightened me, and that night I—I knew I loved you, Ewen."

"Thank God!" he said fervently under his breath;

and then in puzzlement: "But for a year after that you kept away from me, dear."

"I had nothing to do with that," she answered. "It was dear old Charlebois. He sent me away the next day, and I have been virtually in hiding ever since. Why, I do not know. But he promised that he would explain everything to-night."

To-night! *Charlebois* would explain to-night! For a moment that scene in the Red Room rushed back upon Stranway, and a sudden mist was in his eyes, and he could make no answer.

She seemed to sense disaster in his silence.

"Ewen—what is it?" she breathed.

He was at the door now, groping for the knob with his clasped hands as he held her—and still he did not answer.

"Ewen—what is it?" she urged again. "Oh, I begin to see! Something terrible has happened! Something has gone wrong, fearfully wrong—or we would not be here with this danger threatening us. Charlebois—is it Charlebois? *Tell me!*"

"Yes," said Stranway, in a monotone. "Charlebois was shot to-night—two hours ago—by one of those fiends who is downstairs now."

A little cry came from her—of horror, of infinite distress.

"He is—dead?" she questioned brokenly.

"I do not know," Stranway replied in the same monotone; then quickly: "I cannot find the door knob. Reach down and see if you can feel it—can you?"

"Yes," she answered, after an instant. "Here it is. It's turned now—but put me down, I'm sure I can manage."

"No," he said; "we can do better as we are. We

must not make the slightest noise, and even if you could walk at all, you couldn't walk steadily enough for that. Now pull the door open as I step back. Be careful! Don't let it creak!"

Inch by inch, silently, the door swung back. Stranway stepped over the threshold, took another step forward along the hall—and the next instant stood motionless as the Orchid's arms tightened suddenly around him.

"Listen!" she whispered. "Listen—they are coming now!"

But he, too, had heard.

From the hallway below, already past the first flight of stairs, came the sound of footsteps. Instantly Stranway turned, stepped back into the room, and set the Orchid down.

"Stay here!" he said below his breath. "Don't make a sound! Don't leave the room unless I call you!"

"But you?" She reached out her arms to him, trying to hold him back as he turned away. "But you—what are you——"

"I'm going to take the only chance there is," he said quietly—and, drawing the door noiselessly shut behind him, he stepped again into the hall.

The footsteps were on the lower stairs of the second flight now—almost upon him. Grimly, a merciless smile on his set lips, Stranway reached to his hip pocket for his automatic—and then he felt the blood ebb from his face, and his heart seemed to sink within him.

The pocket was empty!

CHAPTER XXX

THE FIGHT

STRANWAY was searching desperately now through his other pockets on the chance that he might merely have misplaced the automatic No—it was gone! He had had it when he had left his rooms to go to Dominic Court, for he remembered distinctly having put it in his pocket—but it was gone now. It must have dropped from his pocket when he was crawling under the car out there on the road with Flint! In any case it was gone, and he was weaponless. With a pistol he might have held the top of the stairs, but now— There were four of them! He might account for one or two, but after that—*what?*

For an instant upon Stranway came fear, deadly, cold, such as he had never known before—not for himself, there was no room for thought of self now, but for the Orchid whose only hope lay in him. Her hair seemed to float again across his cheek, the dark eyes, wistful, full of tender light and trust, to look into his own, and through that agony of fear flashed pictures of long years of the might-have-been, of love and happiness, full of her presence and companionship. For a moment it unnerved him—and then there swept upon him a seething fury, a mad desire for vengeance, a fierce elemental passion that overrode all else.

Like a crouched tiger, Stranway, his body poised a little forward over the topmost stair, waited silently. Up one stair after another came the foot-

steps—of *one* man. The masquerading butler, beyond question! Stranway could just make out the other's shape, irregular, without form, just something a little blacker than the surrounding blackness. Then, suddenly, little flickering gleams of light began to come from the hall below—other footsteps—the bumping of tin cans—smothered oaths. The other three, carrying candles and the kerosene, were not far behind the leader!

But on the stairway itself there was as yet just the *one shadow* upon which Stranway's eyes were set. The shadow bulked larger, coming nearer and nearer. The man could be no more than three steps below him—he could hear the other's breathing now.

Nearer—another step—another! And then Stranway's arms shot out, and, wrapping themselves around the other's knees, tightened like bars of steel. It was lightning quick, the space of time it might take a watch to tick, while Stranway's shoulders heaved upward as though his whole body had been loosed like some Titanic spring. There was a cry, wild, terror-stricken—and from shoulder high he hurled the other from him down the stairs.

There was a thud, a queer *crunching* sound—an instant's silence—then a chorus of cries, the rush of feet, and the flickering lights had gathered around the foot of the stairs.

Fighting for his breath, and back a little from the edge of the top stair now, Stranway watched the scene below, thankful for a moment's respite. Candles in hand, the three men stared dazedly at the curled heap at their feet, at each other, and, through the darkness, toward the head of the stairs; then they bent over the quasi-butler and began to examine him more closely.

"That's blasted queer!" growled one. "He must have fallen the whole length somehow. Nice mess for us! Looks like he's broken his neck."

"No; he hasn't!" It was Jake's voice now. "He's stunned, that's all. He's coming around now."

A touch fell on Stranway's shoulder—it was the Orchid.

"Ewen," she breathed in his ear, "I *can't* stay in there! I must do something to help. Tell me what to do! I can walk better now."

His hand closed over hers.

"Try the end of the hall and see if there's a way to get out on the roof," he whispered; "or try the front room windows for a balcony."

There was the faintest rustle of garments—too low for the preoccupied men below to hear—and she was gone.

Stranway's eyes had never left the group below him at the foot of the stairs. They had set their candles down, and had propped the man up now in a sitting posture against the wall; and, as Jake had said, the fellow seemed to be coming around, for he moaned and lifted his hand to his head.

"What happened you?" demanded Jake. "Did you trip? I told you to take a light."

The man appeared to rouse himself with a sudden effort.

"Trip, you fool!" he snarled. "I didn't trip! There's some one else up there—besides her. Do you hear? There's some one else—and you've got to get him, or we're done. He's trapped up there and he can't get away. Go on—get him—*get him!*"

A low, sullen, vicious oath purled from Jake's lips:

"Didn't I tell you I felt like some one was *watching* me down there? And I'll bet he was, too—and that

he sneaked in after we left the room! If he heard what we said, he's got enough on us to send us to the *chair!*"

"Maybe!" put in one of the others, with a nasty laugh. "Only he'll never get the chance. Come on, now—rush him!"

The man sprang forward as he spoke, Jake close beside him, the third man in the rear. On they came, racing up the stairs; but it was not until they were almost on the top tread that, in the darkness, for the candles below did little more than multiply the shadows, they caught their first glimpse of Stranway —and coincidentally Stranway's fist shot out and smashed with all his weight behind the blow into the nearest face. The man staggered and reeled backward—but at the same instant, and from just behind the first man, another one leaped forward.

Stranway gave back a step to elude this second rush; and again, with every pound that was in him, struck once more—and missed. The man had outguessed him by dropping cleverly to his knees on the top stair. And from this man there came then a jeering laugh—but it was lost the next instant in a fierce exchange of blows, and panting breaths, and the short, hoarse grunts of straining men, as Stranway, carrying the fight to his antagonists, drove in upon them with savage ferocity.

As long as he could keep them on the stairs only two could get at him at once, and even then they were in each other's way. That was why, he kept telling himself now as he fought, he had chosen the head of the stairs to make his stand; kept telling himself over and over that they must not gain a footing on the landing—for a little while at least. He couldn't hold the stairhead forever, of course; the

odds were too heavy—but for a little while—until, pray God, she should have found some way out.

It was dark, brutally dark. If he could only see a little, so that he might horde his strength and waste fewer blows! Two of the men were still on the top stair—at times like elusive shadows! But the other one—where was the other one? He could not make out the third man at all now.

Something gripped and twined around his ankles—a grim, instant answer to his question. The third man had crawled upon him from between the others' legs! And then, as Stranway strove desperately to free himself from this new attack, while still fighting to hold back the other two, a cry, shrill with rage, pain and impotence, came up the stairs from the disabled man below:

"Ah, finish him! You haven't got all night! Put a bullet in him, and have done with it!"

The grip on Stranway's legs tightened—he could not loose himself, and in another second he would be thrown. Better to force the issue than wait for that! It would give *her* a little more time before the inevitable end—just a minute or two more time. He drew his body backward from the knees up—and then, head down like a battering ram, he flung himself suddenly forward in a plunging dive full into the shoulders of the men on the step below him.

There was a crash, the sound of rending wood as the banister sagged—another crash—and the four men were sprawling in a tangled heap upon the stairs.

Up out of the ruck Stranway struggled to his feet. But he was surrounded now, and now he could only fight on blindly while his strength held out. They were pounding at his face, raining blows upon his head. He felt himself swaying, and giddy flashes

swam before his eyes. And then there came a yell again from the disabled man below, but this time it was unmistakably a yell of warning. It was answered by a hoarse, mirthless laugh, the tongue-flame and roar of a revolver shot, a scream—and some one came leaping up the stairs—and Stranway's opponents seemed to melt away from before him, as, evidently in sudden panic, not only at the unexpected attack, but because their presence in the lonely house had obviously been discovered now, they dashed past the newcomer, and rushed headlong down the stairs.

Flint? No, it wasn't Flint! Who, then? The question came and went in a confused way through Stranway's mind, as he jumped back to the landing and threw himself face downward upon the floor. The fight wasn't over yet! Rallied by the frantic yells of their disabled leader, as he screamed out to them that they had only to deal with one man more, from below came a volley of shots. The newcomer flung himself down beside Stranway. Only the leader of the band lay in full view in the candle light, in full range below at the foot of the stairs—the others were scattered farther back along the hall, and were firing out of the darkness.

"You didn't come any too soon, whoever you are," Stranway panted grimly. "If you've got another revolver, I'll take a hand."

"I've only one!" The man fired as he spoke; then, anxiously: "Where is she? Is she safe?"

But it was the Orchid herself who answered suddenly from somewhere behind them.

"Yes, I'm safe," she said.

"Thank God!" ejaculated the man soberly; then, peremptorily: "Get into a room somewhere out of danger until we've settled with this rabble."

"Yes—in a moment!" she replied tensely. "But, first, there is something else. Ewen, are you hurt? I could not find a way out. I could not see, but I could *hear*—and it was terrible! Tell me, tell me, are you hurt?"

"No," Stranway answered quickly. "No; not a bit —but you *must* get back there into that room at once! Please! At once!"

She made no answer, but the next instant, to Stranway's relief, he heard the closing of a door. And now he could smile with grim complacence at the shots that were coming up from the hall below, for, lying flat here on the floor, the bullets must necessarily, from the angle at which they were fired, pass harmlessly overhead. The man beside him, though perhaps no more effectively, fired in turn, coolly, methodically, at the flashes as they came up out of the darkness, and twice reloaded his revolver.

Perhaps five minutes passed, and then in a lull in the firing, the leader's voice calling to his companions, but calling now in piteous entreaty, once more reached the head of the stairs:

"Help me out of here, you cowards! My leg's broken, and my back's hurt! Help me out of here, before they drill me full of holes!"

The man at Stranway's elbow laughed—and in the laugh was something that it was not good to hear.

"Have no fear, Hastvik," he called, a softness in his voice that was deadly in its menace and its irony. "I could have shot you on the way up—or finished you with any shot I have fired from here—you should be *reassured,* should you not?"

"Hastvik!" The man's head lifted, and his eyes strained wildly up the staircase. "Hastvik! Who calls me Hastvik?"

Again the man beside Stranway laughed.

"I do!" he said. "Do you not recognize the voice—Hastvik?"

"Who are you?" Hastvik screamed.

"Who am I?" said the other, and there was a rasp now in his voice. "I am—Kyrloff."

Hastvik with an agonized effort, his face contorted, jerked himself forward from his sitting posture against the wall.

"Kyrloff—eh!" He broke into oaths. "Well, I might have known it! I should have finished you that night on the river bank when we pulled you out of the water—I've cursed myself that I didn't ever since!"

"You threw me back again because you thought that I was already dead," said Kyrloff hoarsely. "But there was enough murder done that night, Hastvik, wasn't there? Enough murder done that night! *My wife*—that you killed, you hell-hound! No, have no fear, Hastvik, I shall not shoot you—unless you move—or one of those others tries to move you. That would be too easy a way out for you. You've had nineteen years of freedom—you know why—but the law is ready and waiting for you now."

Kyrloff—Sanctuary! The last account! That entry in the Red Ledger! The story of that night! Stranway's brain was correlating it all now. This was Kyrloff—the man who had given sanctuary to Charlebois. And below was the man who—

Stranway's mind veered abruptly as he stared fixedly at Hastvik. Had the man's face gone whiter, more a ghastly, bloodless color? In the faint candle light he could not tell; but Hastvik's shoulders and head had slumped suddenly back against the wall, and

the man lay there motionless now as though he had fainted.

A silence had fallen—the other three, hidden below, had evidently been intent upon the scene. But now, suddenly, there came a shot, and, with a muttered exclamation, Kyrloff, who had unconsciously edged a little forward, drew hastily back.

"Hit?" asked Stranway.

"No," Kyrloff answered.

Stranway spoke again quickly:

"Have you plenty of cartridges?"

"Yes," Kyrloff replied.

"Good!" said Stranway. "They can't get up here, and we've nothing to fear, then, unless they carry out their original plan of setting fire to the house. They've, I don't know how many, cans of kerosene below there."

"I stumbled into the cans coming up," said Kyrloff. "But they won't set fire to the house and leave Hastvik there, and they can't move him without coming into the light, or get at the cans either. They're welcome to try! I wish they would! I'd like to get that first fellow back there—ah!" The flash of his revolver cut a lane of light down the staircase; there was an answering yell of pain—and then a hail of bullets came streaming up from below. "Winged him, that's all!" growled Kyrloff. "But I've about got his position now, and next——"

"Do you hear that?" Stranway grasped suddenly at Kyrloff's arm. "There's some one outside!"

From the roadway without came the sound of approaching motor cars, and, a moment later, the sharp whir of tires on the gravel driveway. But the three men below had heard it too! With a rush they sprang from their concealment, making past the light

and down the hallway for the head of the lower flight of stairs. Kyrloff flung his arm forward to fire—and the hammer clicked on an empty shell. He jumped to his feet with a bitter oath.

"After them!" he cried.

For a moment all was wild confusion: rushing feet, slamming doors, cries, hoarse shouts from outside the house—and Hastvik, returned to consciousness again, if indeed he had ever lost it, shrieking in frantic appeal:

"Don't leave me—don't leave me—you blasted curs! Do you hear—Jake!—Blackie—you——" He burst into a torrent of wild blasphemy.

Kyrloff had dashed down the stairs past Hastvik and disappeared along the hall; but Stranway, as the door opened and he heard the Orchid's voice, turned and stepped quickly toward the room in which she had taken refuge.

"Ewen!" she called. "Are you there?"

He reached out in the darkness, and drew her to him. She was trembling, and he brushed back the hair from her forehead tenderly.

"We are safe now," he said. "Quite safe, dear. They have come—Flint, I think, and some of our men from the Court, for there is more than one car outside. Listen! There they are coming up the stairs now."

The pound of feet as a number of men raced up the lower staircase reached them; and then a voice shouted out anxiously:

"Mr. Stranway! Mr. Stranway! Where are you?" Then, suddenly: "Good God, what's this!"

Stranway stepped to the head of the stairs. Flint and three of the organization's men were bending over Hastvik.

"I'm here!" said Stranway.

Flint turned and peered up the stairway.

"You're safe—you're all right?" he cried excitedly.

"All right," said Stranway.

"And the Orchid—is she——"

"Safe," Stranway answered; and then abruptly: "Carry that man down stairs at once, Flint. I imagine he is in rather a bad way, but keep your eye on him just the same. He has probably got a revolver in his pocket, though he was in a predicament where he dared not use it."

"Leave him to us!" Flint replied, a sudden gruffness in his voice; and, motioning to his men to pick Hastvik up, led the way toward the lower stairs.

Stranway turned to the Orchid.

"It's strange," he said musingly. "They all seem to know that you were here. Kyrloff knew—and Flint knew when he called up to me just now. But Flint didn't know when I left him an hour ago."

"You didn't ask him about—Charlebois," she said, in a low voice.

Stranway shook his head. He had feared that there could be but one reply, and he dreaded any further shock to her until she should have recovered, at least in some measure, from the experience she had just been through.

"No," he said slowly.

Quick in her intuition, she spoke:

"Was it because—of me?"

For a moment he held her close to him again, and laid her head upon his shoulder, his cheek against hers—it seemed the only answer he could make. Then, releasing her, he took her hand.

"Come," he said. "We will go down stairs."

CHAPTER XXXI

AT MIDNIGHT

SLOWLY, a little sadly, this shadow upon them, they went down the stairs to the ground floor. There were lights here shining out from the dining room. From outside came the sound of men's voices, the tramp of feet on the driveway; and from still farther away came shouts, and once, muffled by the distance, the report of a revolver shot.

They reached the door of the dining room—but on the threshold they halted suddenly as though of one accord, and for a moment stood motionless, staring incredulously at the scene before them. Then, with a little cry that mingled wonder and joy, the Orchid darted from Stranway's side, and, running across the room, dropped upon her knees beside a stretcher that stood by the French window.

A mist seemed to form before Stranway's eyes—a great happiness to overflow his heart. On the stretcher lay Charlebois. Like a man in a dream then, Stranway walked slowly forward. The little old gentleman was patting the bowed brown head beside him tenderly.

"Ah, little Highness," said Charlebois, a hint of mischievousness creeping into the world of affection that was in his voice, "you must not kneel to any man, you know! And you, my boy"—he raised his hand from her head, and held it out to Stranway—"need I tell you what it means to me to find you both safe? I think, from what I know has happened here, that

to-night must have brought you very close together, though I trust, sir"—the steel-blue eyes twinkled, and his voice grew quizzically stern—"that you have not presumed so far as to be guilty of the crime of lese-majesty against Her Highness the Princess Myril of Karnavia."

"Highness! Princess!" stammered Stranway—and something cold seemed to clutch suddenly at his heart.

The brown head lifted quickly; and the dark eyes, full of happy tears, but with a half startled, half frightened look in them now, searched the face of one and then the other.

"Tut, tut!" said the little old gentleman, smiling at the dismay he had created. "You are conjuring up story-book fancies now, I am sure: that little Myril here is the reigning princess of a kingdom; that she must wed only royal blood; that her duty is to her subjects; that she must bid you a tearful adieu and go back to her country, her crown, and a loveless life! Well, it is nothing of the sort—nothing of the sort! Listen, then! As you may have already surmised, my boy, the manuscript I gave you to read was the story of the night, nineteen years ago, when I escaped in the boat with Myril, a baby of two years old then, and with that box containing the money and papers in a foreign language that you saw on my desk in the Red Room to-night; and I will leave it to you and our good friend Kyrloff there to supply Myril with the details of that part of her story a little later on, for I have many other things to say, and I must not talk any more than I can help."

Absorbed, with no thought but of Charlebois when he had entered, Stranway had taken no notice of any one else in the room. He turned now, following the direction of the little old gentleman's eyes. Back

by the door in the opposite corner, Doctor Damon was bending over Hastvik, who lay upon the floor; and leaning against the wall, his arms folded, like some grim sentinel, stood Kyrloff—older looking now, as he must well be, but still recognizable as the short, stocky, dark-eyed man of Charlebois' manuscript.

Stranway's eyes swept the group, and, as Doctor Damon rose to his feet, held questioningly on the physician, while his head inclined in a significant little nod toward Charlebois.

Doctor Damon shrugged his shoulders.

"My orders did not take precedence at Dominic Court," he said bluntly. "It was the shock and the loss of blood more than anything else that affected him—a bad flesh wound. We stopped the flow, got him around, and——"

"Quite so," interposed Charlebois imperturbably. "I came—and the doctor professionally is an outraged man. Your other patient there, doctor—can he be taken back to town?"

"When I'm through with him," said Doctor Damon crossly.

Charlebois laughed.

"Well, take him into another room, then. Stranway, my boy, call somebody to help. There are plenty of our men around the house."

Stranway stepped to the window.

"Flint! Verot! Sewell!" he called. "Are any of you there?"

"Yes—Verot," answered a voice.

"Bring some one with you," ordered Stranway, "and carry this wounded man out of here."

"At once!" Verot replied—and a moment later, followed by another man, entered the room.

"Verot," demanded Stranway abruptly,, "those other three men didn't get away, did they?"

"I'm afraid they did," Verot answered, with a muttered imprecation. "It's pitch black outside, you know, and they got among the trees before we were hardly out of the cars. But there's half-a-dozen of our men still after them."

Stranway uttered a sharp exclamation, and his fists clenched. It was a little different now, of course, since Charlebois had not been killed, but—

"It doesn't matter," said the little old gentleman quietly. "They were only tools, hired by that man there on the floor—professional thugs from the city's scum. I know them, and to-morrow or the next day we will get them as surely as though we had caught them to-night. You may go, Verot."

Verot and his companion picked Hastvik up, and, followed by Doctor Damon, left the room. Kyrloff, silently, his arms still folded, took a step after them.

"Wait, Kyrloff," Charlebois called. "You have not spoken to Myril here."

Kyrloff paused, and turned a white, set face, with twitching lips, toward them.

"I know—but not now," he said in a colorless voice. "I will atone for that to-morrow. Now, until he is safe in a prison cell, I stay with *him*."

A shadow of sadness stole over Charlebois' face and crept into his eyes, but he made no answer. The door closed behind Kyrloff, and they were alone.

"You must try to bring some brightness into Kyrloff's life, both of you," said the little old gentleman gravely, beckoning Stranway nearer; "for you both owe everything to him. Now listen, for I must be very brief. My side is paining me, and——"

"You shouldn't try to talk now at all," Stranway

interposed quickly. "Wait until another time."

Charlebois shook his head.

"No," he said. "My mind will be relieved and I shall feel easier when I have told you. Karnavia, as you may or may not know, is a small semi-independent principality in Europe, where, as is indeed the custom of many of her greater neighbors, the title of prince or princess, though not uncommon among the nobility, infers no direct connection with the reigning family. That, Myril, is exactly your status. Your mother was one of the wealthiest women in the principality. Her only near kin and heir was a cousin—Prince Stolbek. Both were young—and Stolbek was as poor as your mother was rich. He did not love her. He was too utterly a scoundrel to know the meaning of love. It was her fortune he wanted. But his suave, polished plausibility did not deceive her. She hated him. But even she did not know the worst of him. He was dissolute, reckless, unscrupulous, extravagant, miserably in debt—a criminal."

Charlebois paused to rest for a moment.

"If I am a little disjointed," he resumed, with his gentle smile, "you must bear with me—it is only that I may compress what I have to say into as few sentences as possible. If we were in Karnavia tonight, I suppose I should whisper the name of Versel-Thega, and whisper it with the fear that even the walls had ears."

"Versel-Thega!" exclaimed Stranway. "What is that?"

"A band of thugs, murderers, blackmailers and thieves; a secret society of immense power that has been in existence there for many years, and that draws its membership from the degenerates of all classes," Charlebois answered, a sudden harshness creeping

into his voice. "Hastvik, the man you saw lying there, is one of its leaders—and for nineteen years, little princess, he and those behind him have plotted and schemed to find you and take your life. You will understand now why, in later years, by giving you occasionally an active part in the organization, I sought to school you to situations, sometimes wholly unexpected by you, which would demand from you in return cool, quick-witted action and resourcefulness, so that one day, if the worst befell, this training might stand you, a woman, in good stead; and you will understand now as well, since your life depended upon it, why even your name was kept secret, and, as an additional safeguard, kept secret even from you. It was known only to two people—Kyrloff and myself. As a child and in young girlhood, you could not have been trusted with it; and later, when that period was over, we felt that it would be the kinder thing not to inject unnecessary anxiety and dismay into your life, but to keep you still in ignorance during the few years that yet remained before the danger you were then in would, in the natural course of events, as you will presently see, be definitely and finally a thing of the past."

Again Charlebois paused. From outside, floating in through the windows, came the occasional low tones of some one or other of the men talking together; within the room the silence was tense.

"Prince Stolbek was a member of the Verse-Thega," said Charlebois softly, but with a grim smile that belied his tones. "His social position gave him immunity from suspicion, and was of incalculable value to the society. The advantage was mutual. He lived by his share of the proceeds made by that preying band of vultures. But—I am taking too long

even for a long story. Stolbek kept pressing his attentions upon your mother, Myril—until your father married her instead. Your father was an American consulting engineer. His name was Thornton Havelock. For nearly a year after their marriage they travelled, and then returned to Karnavia. Just after your birth your mother made her will, leaving everything to you, though in trust until your twenty-first birthday. Kyrloff, then a young and prominent lawyer, himself but recently married, and a childhood friend of your mother's, drew the will. He and your father were the trustees."

Charlebois pulled the brown head down beside him, and held it protectingly against his cheek.

"The rest is hard to tell, little one—but you must know. I will hurry over it. Your mother died a few weeks after you were born. A year later your father was mysteriously killed—murdered. Kyrloff and his wife took you to their home. Twice in the next six months an attempt was made on your baby life. And then Kyrloff, stumbling upon the truth—he will tell you how some day himself—fled with you and his wife to America. For months they travelled here and there in an effort to throw their pursuers off the trail, and finally, disguised as settlers and peasants, they hired a little shack in the Adirondacks. It was there that they took me in one night when I was nearly dead from sickness, starvation and exposure—but I have already referred to that."

She was crying softly. Charlebois' own eyes were dim. Stranway knelt and put his arm around Myril's shoulders.

"There is not much more to tell," Charlebois went on. "Stolbek and his vile society were back of the plan. All that they had to do was to put you out

of the way. The fortune would then pass to Stolbek, and, by compact, he was to share it with the Versel-Thega. Hastvik, who had followed Kyrloff to America, eventually traced Kyrloff to the shack, and that night in the attack killed Kyrloff's wife, and, as I believed then, Kyrloff himself. The story now comes to myself. The documents in the box that I could not read, Myril, were your mother's will, her marriage certificate, your birth certificate, and many of her private papers. With plenty of money at my command for the moment—the money that was in the box—I secured accommodation n one of the houses where I escaped; but before I was physically able to leave there, to my intense joy and relief, for, as I have said, I had thought him dead, Kyrloff found me. I then learned your story. There was but one thing to do. Until you were twenty-one, until, to be precise, twelve o'clock to-night, your life would be in constant peril. After that your fortune was in your own hands to will where you pleased, and your enemies were beaten. So——"

"*To-night!*" cried Stranway. "Why, then, this is——"

"Her birthday, yes—or will be as soon as it is midnight," Charlebois smiled. "And may there be many, very many more, and—there, there! Let me finish!"

Stranway had swept Myril to her feet, and now, her eyes lowered shyly, she was holding out her hands to him.

The little old gentleman coughed teasingly.

"Let me finish," he repeated. "I said there was only one thing to do. Kyrloff was known to Hastvik; I was not—*then*. So in a sense, from that day, Myril, I became your guardian. We dared not leave

you too long in one place, so, under an assumed name which, likewise, we were obliged to change from time to time, you were brought up by a great many different people—but always in the most cultured surroundings we could obtain. Meanwhile Kyrloff, who now had resumed more or less his normal life and habits, was dogged constantly by Hastvik; but Hastvik was unable to obtain any clue to Myril's whereabouts until a year ago, when he had the ill or good luck, whichever you choose to call it, to intercept a letter written by me to Kyrloff, and through which my connection with the affair was discovered. Happily though, Kyrloff was expecting the letter, and, anxious because of its non-arrival—he was then in Karnavia—cabled me at once." The little old gentleman turned suddenly to Stranway. "A year ago! The date is significant, is it not, my boy?" he smiled. "Yes, I imagine it is! A year ago, to your great chagrin, and, I am afraid, ill-concealed impatience, and certainly to your utter consternation and bewilderment, the Orchid disappeared—and for a year, until to-night, you have not seen her. The reason is now, of course, obvious to you. The moment I received Kyrloff's cable I sent Myril away from New York, and during all this past year she has been safely hidden in a little town in northern Canada."

"Yes," said Stranway slowly. "Yes, I understand that now. But there is another point that I do not quite understand. You knew this fellow Hastvik, and you had the power—why didn't you settle with the brute and give him the short shrift he deserved?"

"My boy," replied the little old gentleman, with his quizzical smile, "though you may have an ace in your hand, it is not always wise to lead it. If we had put Hastvik, whom we knew, out of the road, an-

other, whom we did not know, would have taken his place, the tables would have been turned, and we would have been the ones who were fighting in the dark. And you must remember, that even up to to-night, Hastvik believed I did not know him personally, and that I would not recognize him even if I saw him —a belief, I might say, that, though entirely erroneous as you will see in a moment, I have taken the greatest care to foster, for, as I had Myril in *my* keeping, the advantage was all with me. And now we come to to-night. Two years ago, I bought this place, and——"

"Two years?" Stranway interrupted. "Why, I heard Hastvik say——"

"Last week, no doubt," interposed Charlebois quietly. "Quite so! But wait, my boy! The plans for to-night, for this little girl's birthday, were laid long ago. The property was bought under another name than mine, the house furnished, redecorated, and the estate put in order; and last week I bought it—from myself. Hastvik, as he believed, and as I intended him to believe, got wind of the transaction quite through his own cleverness; and, in exactly the same way, he discovered that I required the services of a butler. He applied, presenting references, which, if they had not been forged, would have been unimpeachable. I engaged him, and supplied him with money. I told him that I proposed to give a little *birthday* dinner here to-night as a surprise, and that he was on no account to let it become known. I impressed upon him the fact that no one knew I had bought the house, and that I wished the whole affair to be entirely a surprise—even to my own guests. I left all the arrangements in his hands, told him to hire what servants he required, and to get a good chef

—and I gave him the keys to the house. The rest," —Charlebois smiled grimly—"you can pretty well guess for yourselves. Hastvik naturally had very valid reasons of his own with which to account for this desire on my part for so much secrecy. The date was significant—it was Myril's birthday! The game was in his hands. What could be more suitable than a house in the country that had no near neighbors, and that was not even known to be occupied! Myril would be in his power with still a few hours to spare on the last night of grace—and the servants he hired were the thugs associated with him. He intended to make an end of us all—and I intended to bring him at last to an account which would send him to the electric chair! I did not intend that, when the time arrived that rendered it useless for him to make any further attempt on Myril's life, he should merely pack up his belongings and leave the country. That was why I made such *enticing* arrangements for him here to-night. We were playing at very pretty cross-purposes, you see. Everything went as I had planned, until in some way, Myril, they must have caught you down there at the little hotel, to which, as I had instructed you before you left Canada, you were to go directly on your return to the States this morning without stopping or communicating with anybody in New York. I did not have a chance for more than a word with Kyrloff before you came in, but he told me that when he went for you a little while ago to bring you here as we had arranged, you had disappeared, and so, fearful that something had happened, he rushed up here. What *did* happen, Myril?"

"It was just after dark, not more than half-past seven," she said slowly. "I was down by the water

when I was seized, and, I believe, chloroformed, for I do not remember anything else until I found myself tied and gagged upstairs there in that room."

Charlebois' kindly old face wrinkled into a frown.

"It seemed so safe a plan, so safe a place, and so convenient," he said soberly. "It was only two miles from here, and, as I said, Kyrloff was to call for you and bring you here at the prearranged hour to-night. But, perhaps, it was *too* convenient—too near this house. Yes, that was it! I erred there. Some one at the hotel, in spite of the fact that we had, as we believed, made so sure everything was safe for you there, and that you would be carefully guarded, must have, either deliberately or inadvertently, betrayed our trust, for, if Hastvik had simply stumbled upon you by chance, he would not in that way alone have known who you were as he had not seen you since you were a baby. I do not know what happened at the hotel, I do not know how your identity came to be established to Hastvik's satisfaction, I do not know who the guilty one is, but"—his hand clenched tightly—"we will not be long in finding out! In any case, when I first regained consciousness after I was shot, I was sure that in some way they had succeeded in trapping you, Myril, for, unless that were so, it would have been suicide to Hastvik's plans to make any attack on me. But"—his face cleared, and he smiled brightly—"we will not dwell on that phase of it any more. It is over now, and there was another and a happier reason for coming to this house to-night. I had not expected to make the presentation under quite these circumstances, but——" He ended his sentence, in lieu of words, with an expressive little wave of his hand.

"Presentation?" inquired Stranway, wonderingly.

"Of course," said Charlebois, and suddenly into the steel-blue eyes there came a merry twinkle. "Don't young couples have to set up housekeeping any more these days? It's yours, my boy."

"Mine!" In amazement, the color sweeping to his face, Stranway leaned forward. "Mine—you——"

"Now don't make a fuss!" said the little old gentleman, with sudden tartness. "You know how I dislike thanks. It upsets me! Makes me nervous! And I'm in no condition to be upset to-night. I won't listen to a word—not a word! I told you to-night that you were my heir, my boy, and this is just—" He stopped abruptly as the door opened.

Doctor Damon stepped into the room.

"I've got that man ready to be moved," announced the doctor gruffly. "What are you going to do? Stay here—or go back?"

The twinkle came again to the steel-blue eyes.

"Why, whatever you think best, doctor," said the little old gentleman with suspicious meekness. "I'm under your orders, you know."

For a moment the doctor scowled—and then he laughed.

"Very well," he said, "then back you go! Our improvised ambulance is large enough, and I'll take that other chap along too, so as to watch you both. But first, we'll have a look at those dressings."

"Just as you say," said Charlebois, with the same twinkle and the same meekness; then, with a smile, holding out his hands to Myril and Stranway: "You'll have to run along now and let the doctor do his fussing. Flint has got his car fixed again, so don't wait for me—the doctor isn't likely to break any speed laws going in. Come and see me early in the morning."

Myril knelt again and buried her face on the little old gentleman's shoulder; and Stranway, because there was a strange choking in his throat, and because no words would come, silently grasped the other's outstretched hand—and then they passed out through the French window to the lawn.

But now, Stranway, with a whispered word, led the way a little to one side into the shadows and the darkness, where there was none to see. And here, presently, Myril drew back from him a little breathlessly, struggling with her disordered hair.

"Have you forgotten your warning, sir?" she demanded, with dainty, mock severity. "The crime of lese-majesty is a very grave crime, I would have you know—and I am the Princess Myril."

"Princess? Myril? *No!*" Stranway cried—and caught her into his arms again. "To me you will always be—the Orchid!"

THE END

ERIC JACKAMAN
131 DYNEVOR RD
TORONTO 10.